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*Please confirm with the dealer in your area regarding Dolby Atmos, not all are upgraded yet.

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Tel: 0844 412 2262
From outside the UK: +44 (0) 1689 869 840

Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd

TEST WALL IMAGES:

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Home Cinema Choice, ISSN 1359-6276, is published monthly with an additional issue in May by AVTech Media Ltd, a division of MYTIMEDIA Ltd, Enterprise House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, UK. The US annual subscription price is £55GBP (equivalent to approximately 108USD). Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11434, USA. Postmaster: Send address changes to Home Cinema Choice, Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at CDS GLOBAL Ltd, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 9EF. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.



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WELCOME

OLED (Organic Light-Emitting Diode) screen technology has been around for a number of years, used by everything from smartphones to car stereos, yet it's only recently become a home cinema concern.



For instance, **five years ago I got to play with a 15in OLED TV – hardly the right size to immerse oneself in hi-def visuals!**

Now though, OLED stalwart LG (and the maker of that 15in set) is pushing the tech with gusto, offering cinema-sized displays incorporating 4K/Ultra HD resolutions. So has the era of OLED arrived? Possibly. One issue is that OLED is still supported by an army of one (LG), with other brands dipping their toes but not yet diving into the self-emissive waters. Another is that companies are making innovative strides with full-array LED tech, gearing it up to support future High Dynamic Range content. So perhaps what we're really seeing is the start of an OLED vs LED war...

Mark Craven
Editor



WIN!
Pioneer SC-2024
7.2-channel AV
receiver worth
£800!
p36

MENU



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The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



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FEATURES

In-depth interviews and special reports. Starts... p18

18 Munich High-End Show 2015

We reveal the best kit on display at Europe's most spectacular audio expo

20 DTS:X – what you need to know

We report on the new object-based sound format from the multichannel pioneer

COVER STORY

26 Cinema's greatest spies

From Bond and Bourne to Austin Powers!

38 Bringing back the Golden Age

Art Deco cinema room has real wow factor

88 Certified: AV-Holic

Another HCC reader shares their AV setup

SELECT

Looking for new AV kit? Starts... p109

109 Gear guide

The best home cinema kit money can buy

BULLETIN

The place for hot products, trends and technology. Starts... p7

07 Laid-back sonics

Panasonic unleashes its premium soundbar

08 Triple threat

Three times the fun with Pioneer's new AVRs

09 Dolby discusses HDR plans

Brand talks up its High Dynamic Range tech and promises backwards-compatibility

10 Abbey Road's sonic upgrade

Iconic studio now boasts an Atmos audio suite

12 Following the frights

The director of horror hit *It Follows* reveals all

13 News x10

Featuring Sky, Sony, Epson and Iron Maiden

14 Paranoid android

Sci-fi thriller *Chappie* launches on BD and DVD

16 Chroma changer

Sonus faber shows off Chameleon speakers

REGULARS

Whether you want our opinions or your own, these are the places to look. Starts... p79

79 Digital copy

Mark Craven celebrates the best in TV drama – if only he had the time to watch it all

80 Film fanatic

Anton van Beek ponders the part James Cameron played in the failure of 3D TV

82 Picture this

Improve your hi-def gaming experience with these tips from pro calibrator Vincent Teoh

84 Feedback

Share your thoughts with other AV addicts

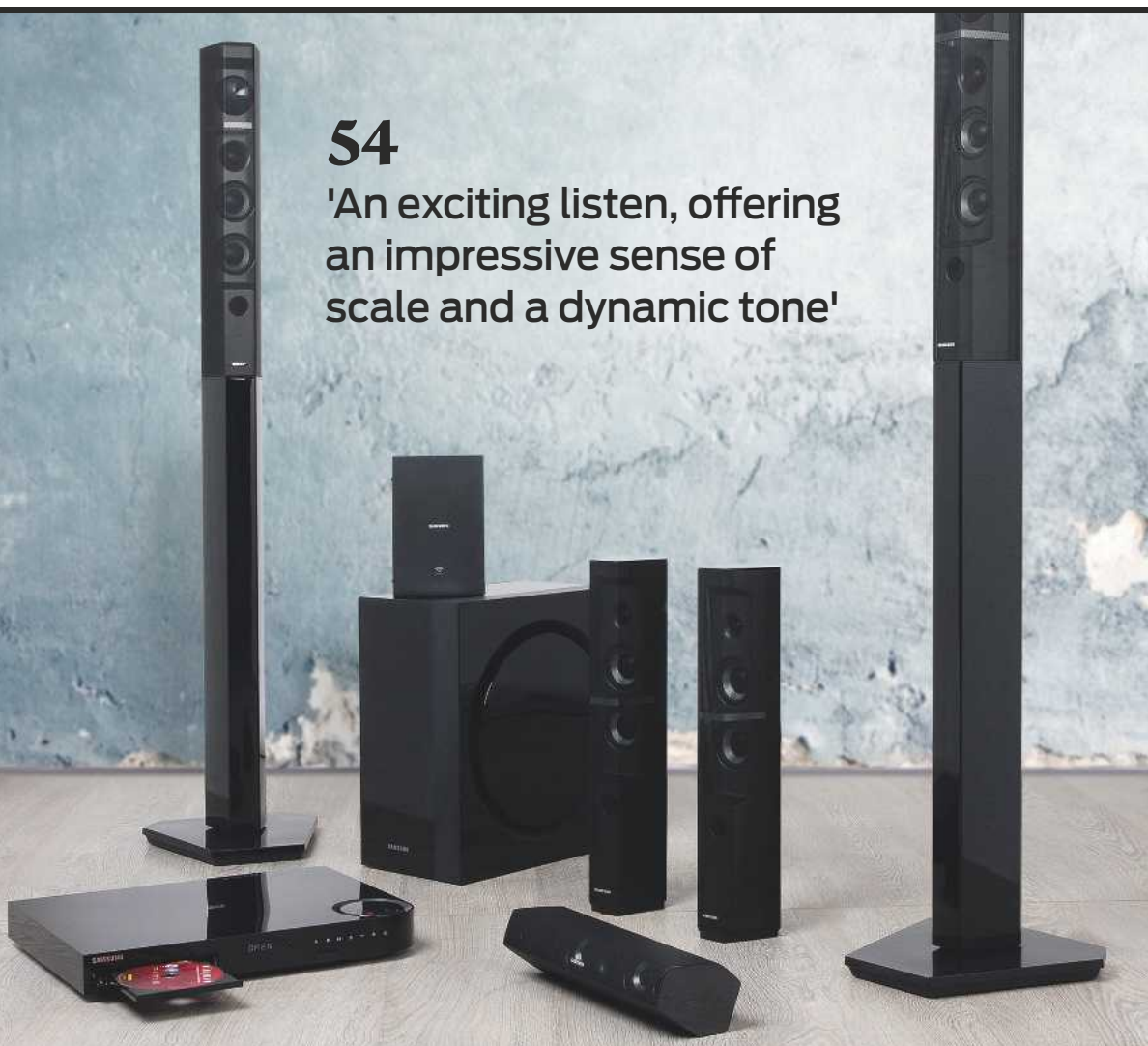
122 AV Avenger

Steve May explains how he's built his very own bijou IMAX experience

COMPETITIONS

86 Great Blu-rays to be won!

Fortitude: Season One, *It Follows* and *Goodfellas* Blu-rays up for grabs!



54
'An exciting listen, offering an impressive sense of scale and a dynamic tone'



46



50



58



62

REVIEWS

With a focus on performance, these are in-depth tests you can trust... **p45**

COVER STORY

46 LG 65EC970V

LG's first 4K/Ultra HD OLED curved TV has hit the UK. Find out why this state-of-the-art screen was worth the wait...

50 Wharfedale Diamond 220 HCP

Affordable 5.1 standmount speaker array has plenty of home cinema sparkle

54 Samsung HT-J7750W

Flagship tallboy 7.1-channel all-in-one system packs a multitude of features

COVER STORY

58 DALI Kubik One

Premium soundbar has looks to die for and the audio performance to match

62 Denon AVR-X7200WA

Nine-channel AV receiver is ready for 3D audio when you are

66 Onkyo HT-S7705

Entry-level Atmos package marries a next-gen AVR with a 5.1.2 speaker array

68 ViewSonic PJD7822HDL

Will this low-cost high-brightness Full HD projector dazzle?

70 Otone SoundBase

UK brand's Bluetooth-equipped soundbase speaker offers real value-for-money

73 QNAP HS-251

Slim-line Network Attached Storage device with added HDMI connectivity

74 Amazon Fire TV Stick

Why the online retailer's Wi-Fi HDMI streaming stick is the ultimate TV dongle

76 Long-term test: Samsung UE65HU8200

After living with this curved 4K/Ultra HD TV for over six months, does it still have the capacity to blow us away? The answer is a resounding 'Yes'...

PLAYBACK



The latest Blu-rays, DVDs and videogames reviewed and rated. Starts... **p93**

94 Blackhat

95 Fifty Shades of Grey: Unseen Edition
Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb
Foxcatcher
A Most Violent Year

96 Exodus: Gods and Kings – 3-Disc Collector's Edition

98 Mortal Kombat X
Final Fantasy Type-0 HD
The Duke of Burgundy
Charlie Chaplin: The Mutual Comedies
Cobain: Montage of Heck

99 Ex_Machina

100 Birdman

101 Strange Days: 20th Anniversary Edition;
Percy's Progress; The Casual Vacancy
Poldark: Complete Series One
LEGO: Justice League vs. Bizarro League

102 American Ninja: The Ultimate Collection 1-4;
Predestination; The Blob
Black Eagle
The Samurai

104 Society: Limited Edition; Mean Streets
Paper Moon; The Train



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BULLETIN

→ **News HIGHLIGHTS** **PIONEER** Trio of affordable AV receivers announced
SONUS FABER Entry-level Chameleon speaker promises to match your décor **DOLBY** The future looks bright for brand's HDR TV tech **ABBEY ROAD** Historic studio gets Atmos upgrade **NEWS X10** The hottest stories in bite-sized chunks **CHAPPIE** Robotic adventure booted up for Blu-ray release **AND MUCH MORE!**

Laid-back sonics

Panasonic SC-HTB885 → www.panasonic.co.uk

Panasonic's premium SC-HTB885 soundbar has now hit UK shop shelves priced at £560. To beef up your TV's audio performance the 'bar uses five internal speakers powered by a second generation of the brand's jitter-reducing LincSD-Amp tech, and is partnered by a wireless down-firing subwoofer. Features include HDMI 2.0 with HDCP 2.2 and 4K/60p passthrough, Clear-mode Dialogue processing and Bluetooth connectivity. As with previous Panasonic models, the SC-HTB885 sports a lean-back, angled design to enable the use of larger drivers.

HCC ONLINE...

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Triple treat

Pioneer VSX-830/VSX-930/VSX-1130 → www.pioneer.eu/uk



Pioneer has kicked off its 2015 AV receiver range with a trio of affordable models. The 5.2-channel VSX-830 (£400), 7.2-channel VSX-930 (£500, pictured) and 7.2-channel VSX-1130 (£600) all feature HDCP 2.2-compliant HDMI connectivity, making them suitable for use with 4K displays and future 4K sources, plus integrated Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. The two seven-channel models add Dolby Atmos support, the PRO iteration of the brand's MCACC setup/EQ system, playback of multichannel FLAC and WAV files, and utilise a higher-spec SABRE E9006S 192kHz/24-bit DAC.

Bright and compact



Following hot on the heels of the two new home cinema projectors it unveiled last month, Vivitek has added a new

Full HD multimedia model to its 2015 line-up. The £875 DH913 replaces the earlier DH912D and is described as being 'ideal for either home or office use' due to its combination of high brightness and a compact form factor. The company claims 3,500 ANSI Lumens and 15,000:1 contrast ratio for the PJ, while other features include 3D compatibility with DLP Link and internal 10W speakers. www.vivitek.eu

Multiroom made easy



Crystal Acoustics plans to make wireless multiroom audio easier than ever with its

newest gizmo. Costing just £50, the Widaptor connects to an audio system or an active speaker, and allows users to transmit their music to it over their Wi-Fi network from a smartphone, tablet or computer. The low-cost device also supports USB playback and is DLNA and AirPlay compatible. Users can also use any number of Widaptors in parallel, linking audio systems in separate rooms into a single multiroom setup. www.crystallaudiovideo.com

Over-ear, over here



KEF has bolstered its M Series headphone line-up with the addition of a new over-ear model. The elegant M400 is made from a compact cast aluminium frame and uses a 'supra aural' ear shell for a tight acoustic seal to give improved noise-isolation. The new headphones also feature KEF's ultra-light, full-range 40mm neodymium driver, including a copper-clad aluminium wire voice coil. The M400 'phones are available from Harrods, priced at £200, and come in a choice of four colour finishes. www.kef.com

Dolby discusses HDR plans

We're backwards-compatible with non-HDR TV screens, says inventor



The future is looking increasingly bright for HDR (High Dynamic Range) TV, with one of the pivotal players in the race to establish an industry standard being Dolby. The company recently partnered with Wal-Mart streaming service Vudu, and signed top US TV brand Vizio as a display partner for its proprietary Dolby Vision format.

HCC caught up with Stephen Auld, the brand's Senior Account Manager, at the recent Future of Home Cinema trade conference to learn more about Dolby's latest brainchild. While Auld wouldn't be drawn on any European partnerships just yet, he did suggest that HDR would be big news at this September's IFA technology fair. 'It's going to be huge,' he enthused.

Dolby has little doubt that the technology will catch on with consumers. 'When you combine 4K with HDR the difference over Full HD is like night and day.' Fears that Dolby Vision HDR could prove uncomfortably bright to watch are unfounded though, he insisted. 'The thing to remember is that 800 Nits (the specification for the HDR-enabled



Stephen Auld: 'When you combine 4K with High Dynamic Range the difference over Full HD is like night and day'

Vizio TVs) is peak brightness. If you look at screens with a global backlight, everything is on, so you just have a horribly bright image.

We now have the ability to control brightness across the display. That's the beauty of HDR, you can have all the detail all at the same time.' The result, he states, 'is an image that's so much more realistic.'

Backwards compatibility

Auld was also keen to stress that Dolby Vision is backwards-compatible with non-HDR sets. 'There's a Dual Layer Dolby Vision approach which is backwards-compatible. With this there is a standard dynamic range component in the video bitstream which can be pumped into a regular display. We also have a single-layer HDR approach (for 4K-only TVs).'

The Dolby Vision encoder accepts a 12-bit signal and separates it into a base layer (be it 8-bit AVC for HD or 10-bit HEVC for 4K) and an enhancement layer. It's the latter which contains metadata plus any additional information required for Dolby Vision-enabled screens. 'We use metadata to guarantee a good viewing experience,' says Auld. 'It's crucial to carry info about how the picture is graded.'

As for broadcasters, Auld says that there is no significant downside to upgrading a broadcast to HDR. The metadata-rich enhancement layer requires an incremental bandwidth of 20 per cent compared to a standard dynamic range image. 'Compare that to 4K versus standard HD, it's not that much of an overhead – and when you start to combine that with new codecs, HDR starts to become a reasonable proposition for content providers.'



PLAYLIST...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

Interstellar (All-region BD)

The awe-inspiring HD visuals and lossless sonics that Christopher Nolan's sci-fi spectacular unleashes on your home cinema more than make up for the film's occasionally clumsy storytelling.



Inside No. 9: Series 2 (R2 DVD)



This BBC anthology series is well worth picking up on DVD, if only to savour the hysterical *The Trial of Elizabeth Gadge* again and again...

Automata (Region B BD)



This dystopian sci-fi sleeper is no *Blade Runner* (as much as it wishes it was), but still impresses with its intriguing story and rich visual style.

Bloodborne (PS4)



From Software's latest action-RPG is a cracking new addition to the PS4 lineup. Just be prepared to die quite a lot...

The Ghoul (Region B BD)



A welcome hi-def debut for this early British horror, bolstered by a chat track from genre experts Kim Newman and Stephen Jones.

EXTRAS...

Small items that could make a big impression

The Art and Making of Penny Dreadful



Timed to coincide with the arrival of the show's second season on our TV screens, this £20 hardback takes a look at the creation of the initial run of eight episodes. Packed with in-depth interviews, behind-the-scenes photos and production art, it's guaranteed to keep fans of the show occupied.

Bruce Lee 'Gung Fu Scratch' T-Shirt



You may not be able to afford your own Iron Man armour, but you can still dress like Tony Stark with this natty Bruce Lee T-shirt that the character dons in *Age of Ultron*. Available exclusively from web retailer Vanilla Underground, it can be yours for £35.

Modern Sci-Fi Films FAQ



Tom DeMichael's £20 guide book avoids the usual encyclopedic approach in favour of a more focused look at key sci-fi films from the past 40 years, grouped together by theme. Along the way he also unearths a treasure-trove of facts and trivia that should delight genre lovers.

Abbey Road's sonic upgrade

Iconic recording studio becomes first in Europe to offer 3D audio suite

London's Abbey Road recording studio has become the first in Europe to install a complete Dolby Atmos mastering suite. The venue, world famous for its '60s Beatles sessions, is also responsible for numerous contemporary film soundtracks.

The object-based upgrade is all part of a money-no-object revamp for the Grade II-listed building. The owners believe that the refresh will cement the studio's position as Europe's leading venue for soundtrack recording, as well as enable it to innovate with object-based music recordings.

There have been various attempts to establish surround sound music over the years, from multichannel Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio to Blu-ray Pure Audio releases. None have really gained widespread acceptance. However, Dolby recently demo'd an Atmos-encoded choir to illustrate just how atmospheric 3D sound *sans* images can be and a leading AV brand confided to HCC that it would probably only be a matter of time before two-channel hi-fi amplifiers began to offer HDMI inputs for high-resolution, object-based two-channel audio.

Getting it right

Producer and post-production expert Jon Thompson, who heads up Picture Worx Films Ltd, believes that Dolby is on the right track with Atmos. 'Unfortunately the company dropped the ball with TrueHD. The authoring software was never very good,' he told HCC. 'But with Dolby Atmos I think they have got it right. It should be a lot easier to transition the home market to Atmos.'

Dolby Labs Senior Account Manager Stephen Auld says the Atmos-isation of Abbey Road is key: 'You need these facilities. If you've got an artist with great content, who wants to do a Blu-ray or stream in Dolby Atmos, they will want somewhere where they can remix or change it. Abbey Road is ready to go.'



Jon Thompson: 'Unfortunately, Dolby dropped the ball with TrueHD. But with Atmos they got the software right'

When questioned about the slow roll-out of Dolby Atmos BD releases, Auld is more defensive. 'We're getting there. With playback, we have a nice mix of manufacturers and range of products. What we're learning now is that in terms of global content, music and regionalisation are important.'

Auld cites Germany where the extreme sports documentary *Attention: A Life in Extremes*, as well as music release *Metallica: Through the Never*, have been Atmos best sellers. 'If you look at the emerging markets, there's a lot of growth for these sorts of systems. They're hungry for local, regional content, so we've made an effort to engage in local content production,' he says. 'We would like to see a lot more UK or US titles. But, for the growth and success of the format, it's important that you have the facilities and tools to create that content. We've put a lot of effort into working with partners to get things set up.'



Metallica: Through the Never rocks an Atmos mix on BD in Germany

Driving down the cost of Atmos

Onkyo brings next-gen audio to a larger audience with affordable new AVR

The TX-NR545 (pictured) is Onkyo's newest 7.2-channel AV receiver and, at just £450, it's the brand's most affordable Dolby Atmos-compatible model to date.

Available now in a choice of black and silver finishes, the TX-NR545 claims a power output of 120W per channel, and boasts integrated Wi-Fi and Bluetooth support, as well as AirPlay and Spotify Connect compatibility. Native support for DSD 5.6MHz and 192kHz/24-bit hi-res audio via DLNA is also provided.

Other specifications include six 4K/60p-compatible HDMI 2.0a inputs with HDCP 2.2

compliance for source components, plus an Asahi-Kasei AK4458 DAC with digital filtering tech.

The company has also introduced a new £250 entry-level 5.1 model. While the TX-SR343 doesn't offer Dolby Atmos, it still boasts 100W per channel, four HDCP 2.2-compliant HDMI inputs and a revamped rear panel with clearer labelling.

Onkyo's £450 TX-NR545





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DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

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05: Electric Boogaloo: The Wild Untold Story of Cannon Films

This wonderful documentary about the legendary '80s studio responsible for the likes of *American Ninja* and *The Delta Force* gets a limited UK cinema release today.
www.metrodomegroup.com

08: Inherent Vice

Paul Thomas Anderson's comedy crime drama follows a drugged-up private investigator asked to help stop a wealthy real estate developer from being abducted. Track it down on DVD and Blu-ray.
www.warnerbros.co.uk

**12: Jurassic World**

Chris Pratt continues his quest to star in every conceivable action/sci-fi franchise with this latest sequel to *Jurassic Park*. Get ready for plenty of rampaging dino action as it lands in UK cinemas.
www.universalpictures.co.uk

13: InfoComm 15

The world's largest pro AV event pitches up in Orlando for six days, with exhibitors from more than 980 companies waiting to show off the hottest AV gear and gadgets.
www.infocommshow.org

15: Taken 3

Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson) returns to DVD and Blu-ray for more hard-hitting action, with the hi-def version promising an 'Extended Harder Cut' of the movie.
www.fox.co.uk

26: Minions

Find out how the little yellow Minions ended up working for Gru as the *Despicable Me* spin-off hits cinemas in 2D and 3D across the country.
www.universalpictures.co.uk

29: Jupiter Ascending

Will the Wachowskis' latest sci-fi epic (and theatrical flop) finally find an appreciative audience when it arrives on DVD, Blu-ray and 3D Blu-ray from today?
www.warnerbros.co.uk

→ JULY

02: HCC #249

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www.homecinemachoice.com

INTERVIEW

Following the frights

Ahead of its Blu-ray and DVD release, director **David Robert Mitchell** spills the beans on his critically-acclaimed fright flick *It Follows*...



***It Follows* deals with a sexually-transmitted spectre that remorselessly pursues and kills those infected by it. Where did the original idea come from?**

The basic idea came from a nightmare I had when I was a kid. I was probably about nine or ten years old and I remember in one of the nightmares I was playing with friends outside school and across the far side of the parking lot I saw this kid walking toward me. He was really far away and just walking really slowly toward me. I pointed it out to the people I was playing with and nobody knew what I was talking about. Eventually I ran about a block from school and then waited and eventually it turned the corner and kept coming for me.

So it was that idea of being followed by something that you can't get away from. I've talked to many people who've had similar nightmares and apparently it's an anxiety dream. I thought it would be cool to make a horror film of that and that's where it started.

What about the idea of a sexually-transmitted curse?

I always liked the idea of it being something that could be passed between people and it just made sense to me that something sexual would work. You're connecting people both physically and emotionally and it just seemed a good thematic link.

Was there ever any worry that the idea could be taken as a form of moralising?

I've had people read it that way. I certainly don't mean that and I don't think it has a puritanical message, but I like that people read the film in different ways. That's kind of cool. For me, in the film, sex is the thing that opens people up to this danger but the truth is it's also the thing that can



release them, at least temporarily. So it's not that simple.

Did you study any other horror films before starting *It Follows*?

I'm a big horror fan so I've seen a ton of stuff from horror classics to stuff coming out now. So yes, I watched a ton of it. I'm a big film fan period, but horror particularly.

The film doesn't seem to be set in any particular era. Was that deliberate?

That's intentional. We built the film from a production standpoint as if it were several different eras. A lot of stuff was from the '50s, '60s, '70s and there are some modern things as well. It puts the film a little bit outside of time, closer to being a dream.

How did you come to cast Maika Monroe as the lead?

She auditioned for us and was fantastic, so we immediately knew that she was the right person. It's a tricky part, because certain aspects of it are pretty subtle and low-key and then all of a sudden the character reaches these points of very high emotion. To do that right in a believable way is very difficult, but she can.

How did you decide how the followers were going to look?

The 'Its'? They were all in the

A first date takes a nasty turn for actress Maika Monroe in *It Follows*

script in roughly the way they appear in the film and then we spent a lot of time on casting to get the right people. It was just what seemed strange to me in that moment, or what felt right and was disturbing to me. It was just what I was afraid of!

When did you know the film was really working for audiences?

It was at our first screening at Cannes last year. It hadn't played for a real audience yet and I was pretty nervous about how it would play for people. That really was the scariest part – waiting to get a sense of whether people will enjoy the movie or not.

During that first screening I was sitting right in the middle of the audience and started to notice there was some tension around. The next thing I know there was screaming, then somebody dropped something in the theatre and everybody jumped. They were very on edge. That was good!

So once that screening was over I knew that the film was working for people.

It Follows is available on Blu-ray, DVD, VOD and Digital Download from June 29th, courtesy of Icon Home Entertainment

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Sky closes 3D channel

Sky has confirmed that it is closing its dedicated 3D channel after five years on the air. Instead, from June 9 onwards, 3D content will only be available through Sky's on-demand services. Despite investing heavily in content (including David Attenborough's *Flying Monsters 3D* and major sporting events) and making the technology available in pubs across the UK, the satcaster has been unable to make 3D a hit with viewers. But on a positive note, the closure of the channel could free up some much-needed space for 4K/Ultra HD broadcasting...

2 Maiden the UK

Team HCC loves rocking out to a bit of *Run to the Hills* or *Stranger in a Strange Land*, so we were understandably chuffed to learn that the entire Iron Maiden catalogue is available for the first time as high-res audio downloads. The brand-new remasters of all 15 studio albums (plus two 'Best of' compilations and two live albums) are available exclusively via the OnkyoMusic download service.

3 Playing with Atmos

Electronic Arts has revealed that the PC version of its upcoming next-gen blockbuster *Star Wars: Battlefront* will be the world's first videogame to feature a Dolby Atmos soundtrack. The game is due to launch on November 20, when it will be joined by non-Atmos Xbox One and PlayStation 4 incarnations.

4 Out-of-this-world screen

Screen Innovations has created a one-of-a-kind projection screen for the International Space Station. Dubbed the ISS Viewscreen, the ultra-portable 65in ambient-light-rejecting zero-gravity screen was designed to replace the tablets that the crew members had previously been using to communicate with Mission Control.

News x10

5 BBC Three online delay

The BBC Trust has delayed plans to make BBC Three into an online-only service until 2016. The Beeb's governing body claims that the move has been pushed back due to some of the proposals still needing approval.

6 Sony confirms HDR

Sony has revealed that it will be adding HDR (High Dynamic Range) compatibility to its flagship BRAVIA X93C and X94C 4K/UHD TV series via a network update coming this Summer. 'Our decades of experience allow us to introduce the emerging industry standard HDR to our 4K/UHD TVs, and to reinforce contrast thanks to Sony's unique technology X-tended Dynamic Range PRO,' claims Neil King, Sony UK's Head of Home Entertainment.

7 Ultra HD Blu-ray finalised

The Blu-ray Disc Association has finally announced completion of the Ultra HD Blu-ray specification. In addition to up-to 3,840 x 2,160 image resolution, it also includes support for HDR, high frame rates, object-based audio and backwards compatibility with current Blu-ray discs. Next stop – hardware!

8 Epson still number one

Epson has been named the world's number one projector manufacturer by market analyst Futuresource Consulting Limited for the 14th(!) successive year. The news reflects the fact that the brand continues to hold on to the largest share of the market for 500 Lumens and higher projectors.

9 Hobbit beats Paddington

The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies has stolen the accolade of 2015's fastest-selling UK home entertainment release from *Paddington*. Peter Jackson's fantasy sequel notched up 'Week One' sales of 478,000, against the 465,000 copies its ursine competitor shifted during its first week on sale.

10 X-Men sequel goes Rogue

The extended 'Rogue Cut' of *X-Men: Days of Future Past* will feature 17 mins of additional footage when it lands on Blu-ray on July 13. The bulk of the restored footage will feature Anna Paquin's Rogue, who was almost completely excised from the original cut.



Superhero sequel gets more Rogue on Blu-ray

PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

It remake finds clown

22-year-old English actor Will Poulter (last seen in *The Maze Runner*) has been cast as the demon clown Pennywise in New Line's upcoming two-part bigscreen adaptation of Stephen King's *It*.

Fett's entertainment



It's looking increasingly likely that *Star Wars* fan-favourite Boba Fett will be getting his own movie. The bounty hunter will reportedly be the focus of Disney's second *Star Wars* Anthology film – however, it won't be directed by *Fantastic Four*'s Josh Trank, who recently left the project.

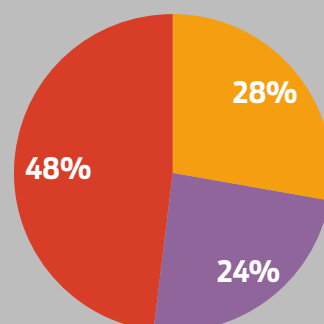
Enlisting for ...Civil War

Another month, another round of casting for *Captain America: Civil War*. Emily VanCamp has been confirmed as returning as Agent 13 from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, while Martin Freeman has revealed that he'll be joining his *Sherlock* TV series co-star Benedict Cumberbatch in the Marvel universe in an unknown role.

WE ASKED...

How do you feel about Sky pulling the plug on its 3D channel?

- Gutted – I often watched it
- Meh... Not really bothered
- Great – 3D TV is a waste of time!



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

Paranoid android

Chappie → Sony Pictures → All-region BD & R2 DVD

The cinema release of *Chappie*, director Neill Blomkamp's mash-up of *Short Circuit* and *RoboCop*, was somewhat overshadowed by the news that the visionary filmmaker had been hired to direct a new *Alien* sequel. However, the upcoming UK DVD and Blu-ray release (July 13) should give Blomkamp's latest sci-fi flick the chance to find a more receptive audience, with the hi-def platter promising plenty of extras including an alternate ending, an extended sequence and nine behind-the-scenes featurettes. Ask your robot to pre-order you a copy.

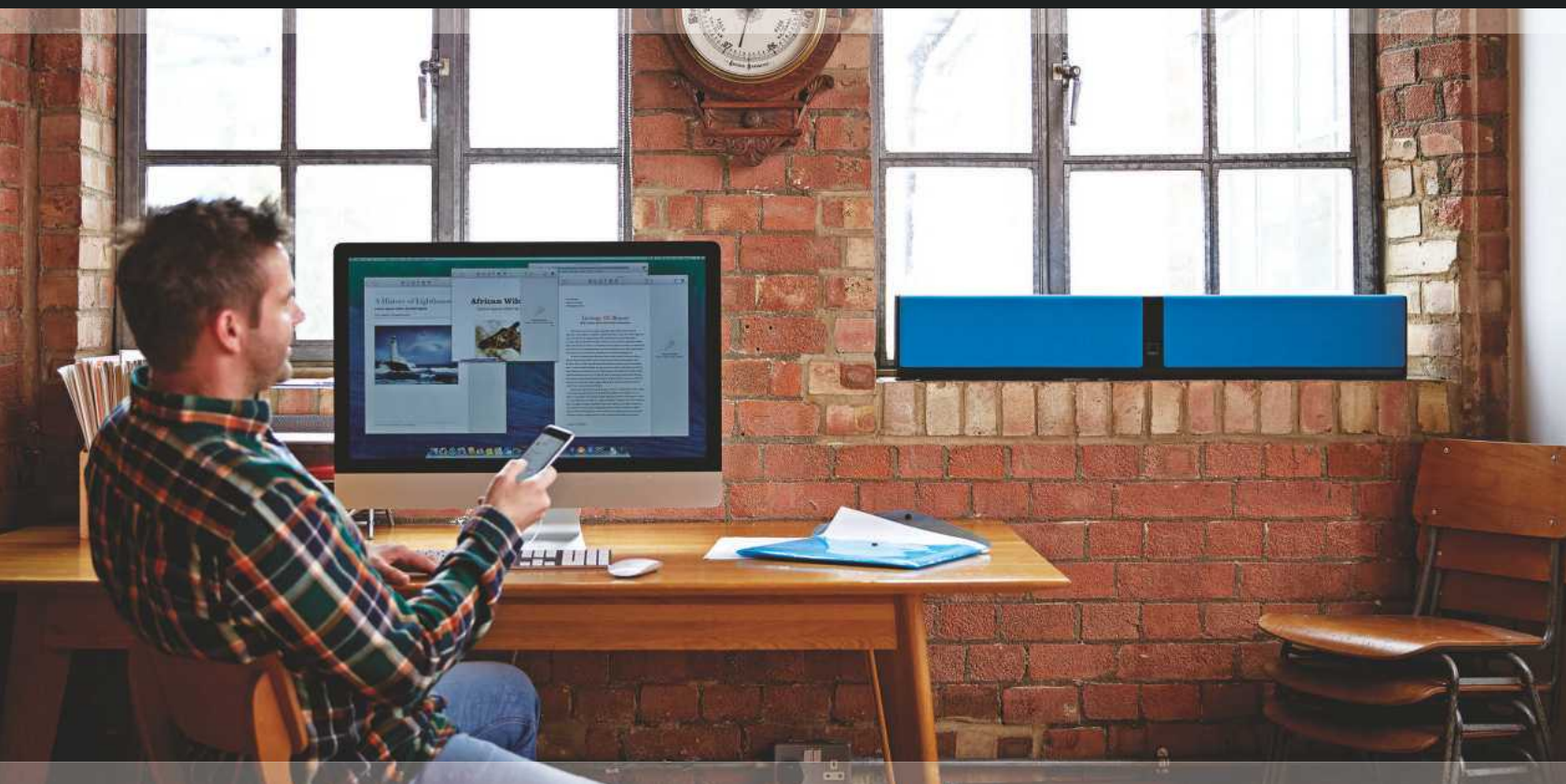




IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

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- Listen Your Way



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Learn more about the KUBIKs on www.dalikubik.com

Chroma changer

Sonus faber Chameleon → www.absolutesounds.com



Style-conscious Italian loudspeaker maker Sonus faber is hoping to 'tszuj up' our home cinemas with its new Chameleon range. As the name indicates, these handmade speakers can change colour to suit any environment, thanks to the use of interchangeable side panels that are available in six finishes (white, black, metal

blue, metal grey, orange and red). The line-up consists of the Chameleon B standmount (£700 p/p), the Chameleon T floorstander (£1,670 p/p) and the Chameleon C centre (£430). Each model comes supplied with one set of side panels, with additional sets costing between £42 and £332 depending on the type of speaker.

T SERIES



Slim speakers, serious sound

If you're used to flat screen TV speakers that sound as thin as they look, KEF's ultra-low profile T Series will be music to your ears.

The secret lies in uniquely advanced acoustic technologies that deliver audiophile quality three-dimensional sound without the need for big boxy cabinets.

Available as a complete 5.1 surround sound system or match the satellites with KEF's in-ceiling speakers for a discrete home theatre system, KEF's T Series allows flexibility in positioning for any room.

If you take your home entertainment as seriously as your interior design, nothing else even comes close.



Nine things we loved at Munich 2015

In May, Europe's biggest and most spectacular audio show opened its doors once more and **Ed Selley** was there to sniff out the highlights



The High End Show this year saw over 900 products clamouring for attention

ANYONE WHO FEELS that the Sound & Vision show at Bristol is 'big' owes it to themselves to visit the MOC exhibition centre in Munich at least once for the annual High End Show. Three open halls, two atriums and countless rooms make this is an event that really needs a minimum of two days to explore. And people make the effort: attendance is impressively high both in terms of trade and public.

The major focus of the show remains two-channel hardware – and often very expensive hardware – but there were some interesting AV products breaking cover that could be on your radar in the coming months....

1. XTZ and Auro-3D

The only Auro-3D demo of the show had the benefit of being demonstrated via XTZ's impressive Cinema Series of speakers. With no less than eight 12in woofers – including three arranged in the distinctive triple stack configuration that the design allows for – you might have thought that the effect would be pure shock and awe. In reality, the way that this huge wall of bass worked with the M6 speaker was very well integrated and effortlessly powerful. As yet, Auro-3D only exists as a series of demo clips and a music platter, and obviously these are going to show the format off to its best advantage, but using the height channels to shift the whole axis of a soundmix rather than overlaying effects over the top of an existing one is certainly an impressive trick.

2. ELAC and Dolby Atmos

If you were looking for a spot of shock and awe, ELAC was providing it in its cinema demo room. Its 7.3.4 demonstration was well set up and extremely well presented, and where the XTZ demo went long on implied grunt, the ELAC one left me in no doubt that this is a seriously powerful system. The Line 500 is the brand's flagship range and doesn't bother with anything so effeminate as a standmount. These speakers were backed up with three of the app-controlled Sub 2070 subwoofers, plus members of the company's custom install line for height duties. The resulting array managed to create immense sound pressure levels but stayed usefully refined at the same time.

3. Nubert and Dolby Atmos

The final of the three 3D audio demos at Munich was perhaps the most interesting. Nubert is a German speaker manufacturer that operates on the direct sale model and seems content to leave the UK market to its own devices. This is a shame because the updated nuVero range of speakers put in an absolutely superb performance with Atmos material. With a larger room to make use of, Nubert's system sounded more spacious and cinematic than the

'British brand Q Acoustics were operating as a little island of affordability in a sea of high-end luxury'

other demos, and the height implementation integrated perfectly with the main speakers. And the keen pricing that comes as a consequence of its direct sales model meant that this nuVero package was comfortably cheaper than the ELAC system and similar in overall cost to the XTZ.

4. Q Acoustics Concept Centre

At the Munich show, Brit brand Q Acoustics were operating as a little island of affordability in a sea of high-end luxury – and managing to punch well above their weight in demo terms. However, the most potentially exciting product in the room was on static display. Those with a stereo disposition have been

A centre channel joins Q Acoustics' Concept lineup



raving about its 'Concept' range of speakers for some time. Now, having blown a little hot and cold on the idea, the company has decided to craft a centre speaker for the range. Using the same 'gelcore' cabinet principle as the stereo models, the result is an incredibly inert and resonance-free speaker that allows its drivers to get on with the task of reproducing extremely uncoloured sound. Pricing is yet to be confirmed, but this is a development multichannel fans should keep an eye/ear on.

5. Cambridge Audio CXR120 & 200

Cambridge Audio brought along the final production standard versions of its upcoming CXR AV receivers. While having to make do without Atmos decoding, the spec of the two models is otherwise very competitive, and with onboard UPnP streaming, app control and online software updates finally joining the specification sheet, it means that enjoying the key selling point of the CXRs should be easier than ever before. That main benefit is seven channels of audiophile class AB amplification chucking out either 120W in the case of the 'smaller' CXR120 or 200W with the flagship CXR200. Wrapped in the new CX casework, the two amps look very smart and should be available in stores in a month or two.

6. Focal Sopra

As befits a two-channel show, the news from France's biggest speaker brand was centred around two new stereo loudspeakers, yet given that every other range the company makes (including the mighty Utopia line) has home cinema-specific models in it, it may be that the new Sopra range gains multichannel options in time. If it does, all signs point to it being something of a star turn. The result of an extended research program with a view to

improving driver performance, the Sopra 1 standmount and Sopra 2 floorstander showed delectable sonic attributes during their short demo, and the new styling looks excellent in the flesh.

7. Chord DAVE

Product names at Munich generally test the boundaries of superlatives to breaking point or revert to good old numbering. This wasn't the path taken by Chord Electronics, however – the latest Digital-to-Analogue Converter (DAC) from the Kent digital specialist goes by the rather easier to remember handle of DAVE. This is, I'm told, an acronym for Digital to Analogue Veritas in Extremis...

Odd name aside, DAVE is comfortably state-of-the-art and is built around the company's entirely bespoke decoding and filtering systems. If you feel your life isn't complete without a DAVE in it, you'll need to have a look down the back of the sofa for £8,000.

8. Analogue madness

One area where this audio show seldom disappoints is in the number of truly outlandish turntables on display. This year was no exception, with a bewildering variety of designs containing improbable amounts of precious metals and thousands of man hours of construction. My 'peak Munich' moment would probably be the Klimo Tafelrunde turntable, which sports no less than four of the company's Lancelotto tonearms, all perched atop the dedicated Gestell support table. This monument to chrome was on static display, but a (slightly) simpler version with one arm was running and sounded almost as good as it looks. You'll need around €50,000 for the four-arm version, which may even make vinyl lovers stop and think.

9. Living Voice

As a combination of sheer effort, mind-boggling attention to detail and simply astonishing sound quality, the Living Voice demo room took some beating. Its Vox Olympian horn loudspeaker is the result of years of development and a near obsessive attention to detail – each speaker has to count as one of the most beautifully finished objects of any type on the planet. The supporting cast of Kondo and CEC electronics is hardly shabby either, and in order to wring the last ounce of performance out of the system, it wasn't connected to the mains but was instead running off 750kg of lead-acid batteries. The price for the record, is on application only ■



Focal's new Sopra speakers feature the brand's distinctive angled design



Left-to-right: Klimo's cost-no-object Tafelrunde turntable; Chord Electronics' new DAVE DAC

DTS has jumped into the object-based audio arena with DTS:X, a rival immersive sound format to Dolby Atmos. But how does it compare and why should you care? **Steve May** is your guide

DTS:X

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

So, I see that DTS has announced its new DTS:X format. Should I be excited?

Heck yes! Dolby Atmos has raised the bar when it comes to home cinema sound, so we're psyched to hear what DTS will bring to the object-based audio party. And you can't have Next Gen Dolby without Next Gen DTS. That would be like Laurel without Hardy or Wachowski without Wachowski.

Okay, so how does it differ to Dolby Atmos?

There are key differences in the way DTS has approached object-based sonics. For starters there isn't a prescribed number of audio channels or speaker configuration. The DTS:X renderer will deploy a soundmix depending on your speaker layout, which makes it extremely versatile. It also offers content makers some cool new tricks.

DTS:X doesn't just treat individual elements (a gun shot, object flyover or an explosion) as an individual object, it can also treat the entire dialogue track as a single object, or objects. If the content creator wants to allow it, you could boost the dialogue level of a movie to suit specific listening conditions (maybe if you're watching late at night). Alternatively it might give you control of commentary or crowd noises during a sporting event or music show.

Are DTS:X and MDA (Multi Dimensional Audio) the same thing?

DTS:X technology is built upon MDA, an open source platform for creating object-based audio that DTS has made available to content makers and studios license fee-free. It hopes MDA will be widely adopted, not least because it makes outputting a DTS:X soundtrack for the home a snap. The MDA Creator tool mixes a height layer by default, so expect that to become a standard feature of DTS:X soundtracks.

Who is supporting DTS:X in terms of hardware?

We expect the majority of AV receiver manufacturers to embrace the format. It's no secret that the sales of AVRs have been heading in the wrong direction for years now, as simpler options like soundbars satisfy an increasing number of mainstream viewers. Now both Dolby Atmos and DTS:X bring something entirely new to the table.

Behind the scenes, boffins are rushing to bring out compatible boxes. Denon, Marantz, Onkyo, Yamaha and Pioneer are all in various stages of readiness. Denon and Marantz will offer firmware upgrades to early adopters of its AVR-X7200W (tested on p62) and AV8802 models. Onkyo has promised buyers of its new TX-NR646 and TX-NR747 Atmos receivers a firmware update later this year. High-end processors will come from Steinway Lyngdorf, Theta Digital and Trinnov Audio. Chips are being provided by Cirrus Logic, Analog Devices and Texas Instruments.

As it happens, the arrival of DTS:X coincides with more widespread availability of HDMI 2.0 boards and HDCP 2.2 copy protection support, as well as hi-res audio compatibility for codecs and wrappers such as 192kHz/24-bit FLAC and DSD 5.6. Your next AVR should land fully-loaded, and then some...

I already have a Dolby Atmos AVR – can I firmware upgrade it?

For most products, the answer appears to be no. DTS:X requires a dedicated chipset, which on less expensive kit isn't practical in terms of a swap out.

Will DTS:X work with Dolby Atmos loudspeakers and layouts? I don't want to have to rewire my system again...

Rather than mandate a specific speaker layout, like Dolby has for Atmos, DTS has moved away from a predefined rig. The decoder in your receiver will simply adapt to whatever layout you use, as metadata in the DTS:X bitstream can point sonic objects to whatever loudspeaker configuration the renderer's been told you have.

'Metadata in the DTS:X bitstream can point sonic objects to whatever loudspeaker configuration your system has'

For Dolby Atmos to do its immersive magic, you need a height layer serviced by two or four dedicated speakers. These can be plumbed into your ceiling, or achieved with Dolby-enabled upwards-firing reflective mini-speakers set at precise distances from the listening position. If that's what you have, DTS:X will, we expect, adapt accordingly.

If your layout is less symmetrical, or a standard five- or seven-channel horizontal home cinema configuration, it'll map to that as well. And if you want to go mad with enclosures that's fine, too. We expect higher-end AV receivers to support an 11.2 speaker deployment (7.1 plus 4 heights), but the system can support up to 32 channels if you want to buy a >

Onkyo's new TX-NR646 and TX-NR747 receivers will get a DTS:X update later this year



DTS was launched triumphantly with *Jurassic Park* in 1993, but DTS:X has come too late for the *Jurassic World* sequel (right), released on June 12



processor and tower of power amps. Quite what this all sounds like, though, remains to be heard.

So what about software? DTS isn't involved in movie soundtracks any more...

That's true... at least it was. The arrival of DTS:X actually marks a return to the cinema audio business for the company, after it sold off its *Jurassic Park*-inspired theatrical arm to Datasat in 2008. So you can expect both theatrical and in-home iterations of DTS:X soundtracks.

The history of DTS and cinema audio will be familiar to many *HCC* readers. It was in 1993 that cinema audio startup Digital Theatre Systems persuaded director Steven Spielberg that its multichannel digital cinema sound format would be the perfect fit for his *Jurassic Park* project.

Spielberg in turn persuaded studio Universal to back the format, resulting in DTS playback systems being rushed into American cinemas. The familiar

DTS 5.1 audio codec for DVD was launched three years later.

So we're in for a cinema format war again, with DTS:X slugging it out against Dolby Atmos?

It's certainly looking that way, although 'war' might be overstating it – more a competitive rivalry.

DTS is partnering with GDC Technology, a maker and distributor of digital cinema servers, plus pro audio system provider QSC, and USL, a manufacturer of motion picture audio equipment and sound processors, to get its new system into cinemas worldwide. GDC will act as a DTS:X certification agent and will be responsible for making firmware updates available to theatre owners, across an installed server base of more than 40,000 screens.

The first territory to get DTS:X-certified cinemas will be Asia, with some 350 screens due to come on stream. Carmike Cinemas, one of the largest exhibitors in the US, has also announced a DTS:X upgrade for its theatres this Summer. At present there's no word of any commercial DTS:X installs for Europe or the UK, but give it time. And the company has said its system is suited to smaller theatres as well as the bigger picture palaces.

Hang on, does this mean that movie studios would have to do two mixes of films – one Dolby Atmos and one DTS:X?

Studios have been supplying multiple versions of soundtracks for decades, both in the digital and analogue eras. There's nothing new here. The cinema DSP will contain audio options, and the theatre will play back what is compatible with its own equipment.

The Altitude32 processor from Trinnov will support a DTS:X array of up to 32 channels





Will my existing Blu-ray DTS soundtracks be backwards-compatible with a new DTS:X AV receiver?

As with Dolby Atmos, DTS:X is fully backwards-compatible with previous codecs. Put a DTS:X soundtrack under the microscope (don't try it, you can't) and you'll see the DTS Core element, plus DTS-HD MA and DTS:X residuals. The latter contains all the object metadata. DTS:X plays nice with everything. Stereo, 5.1 or 7.1, all can be remapped using a proprietary Neural:X spatial reformatting engine. Neural:X is basically an update of those Neo:X and Neural Surround modes already available on home cinema kit.

So, what films are coming out in cinemas with DTS:X mixes then?

As yet, nothing has been confirmed. However, with tools being seeded into the Hollywood workflow, it'll only be a matter of time before we see films natively mixed in MDA and available for the home in DTS:X. The MDA Creator Tool can be used to mix other proprietary sound formats, such as IMAX.

Of course, there's nothing to prevent a studio taking an existing immersive soundtrack and remastering it in DTS:X for home release. Don't be surprised to find films released theatrically in Dolby Atmos, making their immersive audio debut in DTS:X.

Okay, I think I'm sold. When can I buy DTS:X-enabled Blu-rays?

Again, there are no confirmed releases just yet. DTS will only say that its authoring tools are currently being evaluated by ten studio partners. It's a fair assumption that those Hollywood heavy hitters

who have yet to release titles in Dolby Atmos (such as 20th Century Fox), could have compatible Blu-rays on the slate before Christmas. The format is also supported by the upcoming Ultra HD Blu-ray specification (along with Atmos), so hopefully it'll be a standard fixture in short order.

I'm just getting into high-res audio. How does DTS:X compare?

DTS:X is very much part of the new high-res audio revolution, and supports lossless encoding. And when bitrates need to be managed, DTS:X can operate in a high-quality lossy mode. Expect 24-bit/192kHz for multichannel and 24-bit/96kHz for object mixes.

Do you think there will be a winner in this audio format war? And where does that leave Auro-3D?

There's one guaranteed winner – and that's you, the home cinema fan. Before too long, Dolby Atmos and DTS:X will be default options for multichannel home cinema, and Blu-ray discs will feature one or the other. For all intents and purposes they'll be interchangeable. The real format squabble to watch will be broadcast UHD. Object-based audio is very much seen as part and parcel of next-generation 4K TV services, and both DTS and Dolby are lobbying hard to become the standard (along with others). As yet, the winner of that technical tussle is far too difficult to call. As for Auro-3D, we don't expect to see widespread adoption of the codec in AV receivers or a concentrated slate of releases anytime soon.

Can't I just stick to regular 5.1? All this 3D audio is doing my nut in...

Sure you can. Actually, 5.1 remains the most common audio mix for movies and TV programmes anyway, so your existing 'flat' system isn't going to show its age for some time to come. And as we've said, immersive audio software is backwards-compatible with whatever kit you have now. Stay proud and play loud! ■

DTS:X – THE RIVALS

Because there's more than one 3D audio game in town

Dolby Atmos



Launched in cinemas in 2012 with Disney Pixar's *Brave*, Dolby Atmos arrived in domestic rooms last

Autumn, with hardware in the shape of Atmos-capable AV receivers and specially-designed reflective speakers to negate the need to fit new enclosures in a ceiling. As with DTS:X, this is an object-based format, although Dolby does have recommended speaker layouts – for home cinemas, two or four height speakers are required.

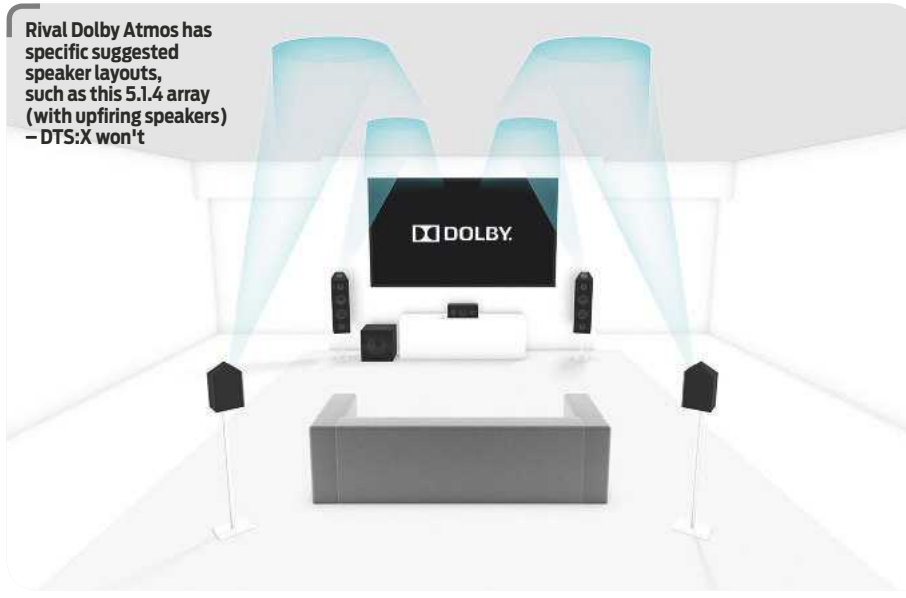
Auro-3D



A format developed by Belgium's Galaxy Studios, Auro-3D incorporates a Height layer (and optional

Top layer with a centralised Voice of God speaker) to create a true hemispherical soundfield. The system has been adopted by cinema outfit Barco for commercial installs, and films (including DreamWorks animations) have been mixed in Auro-3D. Domestic speaker configs run from 9.1 to 13.1, but available software is currently limited to Pure Audio Blu-ray.

Rival Dolby Atmos has specific suggested speaker layouts, such as this 5.1.4 array (with upfiring speakers) – DTS:X won't



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CINEMA'S GREATEST SPIES UNCO

With espionage caper *Kingsman: The Secret Service* arriving on Blu-ray this month, **Team HCC** rounds up fifteen clandestine kings of the silver screen. Just remember: this listicle will self-destruct as soon as you've finished reading

OVERLAP



15>CARMEN & JUNI CORTEZ

This brother and sister pairing are at the centre of Robert Rodriguez's original *Spy Kids* trilogy. As juvenile members of the OSS (the Organisation of Super Spies, of which their parents are retired agents), they have to do battle with mad scientists, evil hypnotists and killer robots – and keep up with their homework at the same time. While the franchise suffers markedly from a bout of inferior sequelitis (especially the fourth, largely unrelated entry), there's no arguing with the manic charm of the first two flicks that hit cinemas only a year apart, and Rodriguez proves just as adept as directing family fun as he is grindhouse revenge fare.



Carmen and Juni are named after members of Rodriguez's family

Get the movies: The first three are available in a *Spy Kids Trilogy* BD boxset from Lionsgate UK. If you're desperate to own *Spy Kids 4*, it's only available as a standalone platter.

14>OSS 117

The creation of prolific French novelist Jean Bruce, secret agent Hubert Bonisseur de La Bath (aka OSS 117) went on to star in a whopping 254 novels. Despite predating James Bond by four years and having his first cinematic outing in 1957 (*OSS 117 n'est pas mort*) it was the phenomenal box office success of Fleming's creation that gave OSS 117 a new lease of life on film, with a series of French flicks during the second half of the 1960s cementing his place in cinema history.

The character recently made a surprise return to the bigscreen in the hit Eurospy parodies *OSS 117: Cairo*, *Nest of Spies* (2006) and *OSS 117: Lost in Rio* (2009), played by *The Artist*'s Jean Dujardin.

Get the movies: The two modern spy spoofs were both released on DVD in the UK, but for hi-def versions of those and the original OSS 117 films you'll have to import the Blu-rays from France.



Salt is peppered with plenty of action scenes

13>EVELYN SALT

There's so far only been one cinematic outing for this all-action spy (played by Angelina Jolie on top fighting form) but we're still hoping that the rumoured sequel to 2010's *Salt* moves into production – wrapping our heads around the twisty-turny plot while soaking up the deftly-handled stunt sequences made for a brilliant 100 minutes. Evelyn Salt – athletic, resourceful, committed – is a CIA agent tasked with preventing a nuclear holocaust. Or is she a Russian sleeper agent looking to obliterate the US? You'll have to watch this cracking movie to find out.

Get the movie: The best option is the three-disc Extended Edition, which includes a trio of cuts – Theatrical, Director's and Extended – and a barrage of solid extra features.

12>NAPOLEON SOLO & ILLYA KURYAKIN



The well-dressed leads of *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* were frequent visitors to the multiplex during the 1960s as the popularity of the TV series created a demand for feature-length outings. Eight were released in a four-year span – an easy job considering they were culled from TV episodes, albeit with additional footage to spice things up.

Still, Solo and Kuryakin deserve their recognition. As a mis-matched American/Russian duo they both highlighted the idiocy of the Cold War and helped kickstart the buddy movie genre.

Get the movies: A UK DVD boxset includes five of the eight ...*U.N.C.L.E.* flicks. Fingers crossed that Guy Ritchie's upcoming reboot will prompt the release of a complete set – maybe even on Blu-ray.

11>ALICIA HUBERMAN

Whether it's Cary Grant being mistaken for one in *North by Northwest* or the group of them out to get Robert Donat in *The 39 Steps*, spies were a regular feature in the films of Alfred Hitchcock. However, none were ever quite as beguiling or exotic as Alicia Huberman from his 1946 thriller *Notorious*. Vividly brought to life by the luminous Ingrid Bergman, Alicia is the daughter of a convicted Nazi spy recruited by Cary Grant's suave government agent to seduce an old friend of her father's, in order to infiltrate a group of neo-Nazis who fled to South America. It's thrilling, heady stuff, with Bergman's electrifying performance making it easy to see why both men fall in love with her so quickly.

Get the movie: Choose between the UK DVD or importing the Region A US Blu-ray



09>HARRY TASKER

The Arnold Schwarzenegger/James Cameron vehicle *True Lies* casts the Austrian Oak as Harry Tasker, an American secret agent so secret that even his wife and child don't know what he does (pretending to be a travelling salesman works well as a cover, of course). In his day job, Tasker is the *crème de la crème*, able to dispatch bad guys without breaking sweat and even fly a Harrier jet when the situation demands it, which contrasts with his inept handling of family life. The first movie to have a budget over \$100m, *True Lies* goes about everything with guns blazing. This may mean that some of the jokes fall flat, but it's consistently entertaining.

Get the movie: Much publicised as a big-budget movie still not given a Blu-ray outing, Tasker fans have to make do with a DVD. Pick up the more recent uncut version, rather than the original release.

10>MALLORY KANE

Before giving up on directing feature films altogether, Steven Soderbergh stopped messing about making *Ocean's Eleven* sequels and turned his hand to a variety of genres. While 2012 stripper drama *Magic Mike* became a global hit, spy thriller *Haywire*, released in the same year, proves the better bet for AV hedz. Soderbergh shows a knack for orchestrating hard-hitting action sequences, dotted liberally throughout a globe-trotting, conspiracy-filled plot, but it's MMA fighter-turned-actress Gina Carano who steals the show as black ops specialist Mallory Kane. Kane is ruthless, moody and astonishingly good with her fists and feet – one hotel-room scrap midway through is worth the price of the BD alone.

Get the movie: The single-disc UK Blu-ray is typically available for a measly £5 nowadays. There's not much in the way of extras, but AV quality is top-notch



Kane wished she'd checked the weather report before getting dressed

WIN! WIN! WIN!

Fancy a copy of *Kingsman: The Secret Service* on Blu-ray? Of course you do...



Get suited up for some high-octane action when *Kingsman: The Secret Service* explodes onto your home cinema. Directed by Matthew Vaughn, this blockbuster comic book adaptation follows an unrefined but promising street kid who is recruited to join a top-secret organisation of spies.

Kingsman: The Secret Service is available to buy now on Digital HD, and on Blu-ray and DVD from June 8 from Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment. As well as a hi-def presentation of the film itself, the Blu-ray also packs an exclusive 90-minute look at the film's iconic style, fights and gadgets.

To be in with a chance of winning one of five copies of *Kingsman: The Secret Service* on Blu-ray, answer the following brain-teaser...

Question:

Director Matthew Vaughn also helmed the bigscreen adaptation of which other Mark Millar comic book?

Answer:

- A) *Kick-Ass*
- B) *Wanted*
- C) *Fantastic Four*

Email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com with '**Kingsman**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

Full terms and conditions can be found on p86.

Michael Caine prepares to pay a visit to the writer of *Jaws: The Revenge*

**08>HARRY PALMER**

Almost an antithesis to the girls, gadgets and glamour of the James Bond movies, 1965's *The Ipcress File* introduced cinemagoers to Harry Palmer, a MoD operative (and Modish dresser) thrown into a dark, complex web of murder, brainwashing and double agents. Played with icy swagger by Michael Caine and packed with downbeat locations (derelict buildings, supermarkets), the first Palmer movie is a British classic, and was quickly followed by two sequels – *Funeral in Berlin* (directed by future *Goldfinger* helmer Guy Hamilton) and *Billion Dollar Brain*, all based upon the original novels by Len Deighton.

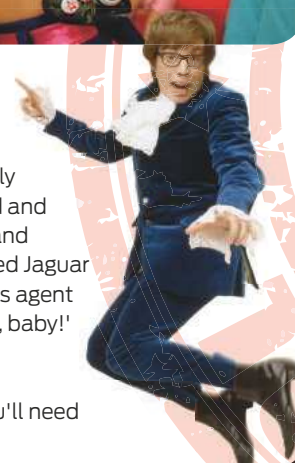
Palmer then lay dormant for nearly 30 years before making a surprise reappearance in two straight-to-video sequels in the mid-90s (again starring Caine).

Get the movies: All five films are housed in the *Harry Palmer Collection* DVD boxset. *The Ipcress File* and *Billion Dollar Brain* are available as individual UK and US Blu-rays respectively. Where *Funeral in Berlin* has got to is an international mystery...

**07>AUSTIN POWERS**

A man with more belief in his talents than he should have, Austin Powers is the most successful spy pastiche yet, lovingly bought to life by Mike Myers in a trilogy of gaudy, joke-packed and innuendo-laden flicks. All the tropes of the Bond franchise (and others) are lampooned here, from the Union Jack-emblazoned Jaguar E-Type to Dr Evil's lair in a volcano. Yes, this velvet-clad Sixties agent is responsible for people thinking it's acceptable to say 'Yeah, baby!' in a naff accent, but he regularly raises a smile.

Get the movies: If you want the Blu-ray trilogy in one set, you'll need to buy the region-free US boxset.





06>JACK RYAN

The CIA analyst of Tom Clancy's long-running series of novels has so far made five appearances on the silver screen, played by four different actors – Alec Baldwin, Harrison Ford, Ben Affleck and Chris Pine. Where Ryan differs to much of his espionage brethren is his brains-over-brawn approach. He doesn't really have any brawn at all, in fact, and comes across as a man almost overwhelmed by his predicament, be it battling an IRA hit squad or dealing with a nuclear blast on US soil.

Ask a group of movie fans which Ryan film is the best and you'll no doubt get an argument. All have their merits, and the franchise as a whole succeeds in combining intricate plotting with tightly-staged set pieces. We'd happily take another five.

Get the movies: Paramount Pictures released a *Jack Ryan Collection* on Blu-ray in 2013, but this only includes the first four films....*Shadow Recruit* is available on a standalone BD



04>GEORGE SMILEY

Compared to the other spies and secret agents in this round-up, George Smiley is something of an oddity, as he's never seen firing heavy artillery or skiing over a cliff with a Union Jack parachute strapped to his back. Instead, author John le Carré's British intelligence agent lives up to his job title by relying solely on his smarts to expose foreign agents and run top-secret international operations. Following a supporting role in 1965's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, Smiley finally took centre stage in the movie adaptation of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* – a role that deservedly landed Gary Oldman a Best Actor nomination at the 2011 Academy Awards.

Get the movies: You can't beat StudioCanal's UK Blu-ray of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* or Criterion's Region A-locked US release of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*



05>BLACK WIDOW

First seen working undercover in *Iron Man 2*, Black Widow (aka Natasha Romanoff) came into her own as a butt-kicking super spy in *Avengers Assemble* where she stood toe-to-toe with the likes of Thor and Captain America, taking on an army of aliens without any superpowers of her own. Since then she has joined Captain America in bringing down the terrorist-infested S.H.I.E.L.D. (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*) and proved to be the only one of the team capable of keeping the Hulk under control (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*). Make no mistake, Black Widow is a true Marvel.

Get the movies: The UK Blu-ray releases of *Iron Man 2* and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* are just fine, but it's worth remembering that Disney UK accidentally used a cut HD master for *Avengers Assemble*, so import the uncut all-region US BD instead. Hopefully the same mistake won't befall *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.



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03> JASON BOURNE

2002 was a milestone year for Hollywood spy films. Not only did it see Pierce Brosnan's James Bond sinking further into self-parody with *Die Another Day*, it also gave cinema audiences their first taste of a truly modern type of spy thriller courtesy of *The Bourne Identity*. Dynamic and suspenseful, this story of amnesiac secret agent Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) piecing together his identity rejuvenated the genre. Then 2004's *The Bourne Supremacy* created a whole new template, with director Paul Greengrass's use of hand-held cameras giving the brutal fights and chases a sense of immediacy that Bourne's rivals (especially the 007 series) have since emulated.

Jason Bourne's story came to a satisfying end in 2007's *The Bourne Ultimatum*, but he remains so popular with audiences and critics that Damon and Greengrass revealed last year that they plan to work together on yet another film outing for the character.

Get the movies: *The Bourne Collection* BD set costs about £15 these days and includes the original trilogy, plus the 2012 spin-off *The Bourne Legacy*. >



At least two more Bourne films are in the works



02> ETHAN HUNT

The US answer to James Bond, *Mission: Impossible*'s Ethan Hunt is a government agent whose globetrotting adventures have seen him and his small team of misfit spies utilise all kinds of tech and disguises to foil the baddies.

While Cruise brings his usual energetic intensity and charisma to the role, what makes it even more memorable is that you always know that it really is him doing all of those insane stunts – whether it's being lowered into a secure chamber on wires, scaling the outside of Dubai's Burj Khalifa tower or clinging on to the side of a plane as it takes off (as will be seen in July's *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*).

Get the movies: *The M:I 4 Movie Set* collects the first four films on BD, although it leaves out the bonus discs made for the third and fourth entries.



Being a window cleaner in Dubai is no fun at all



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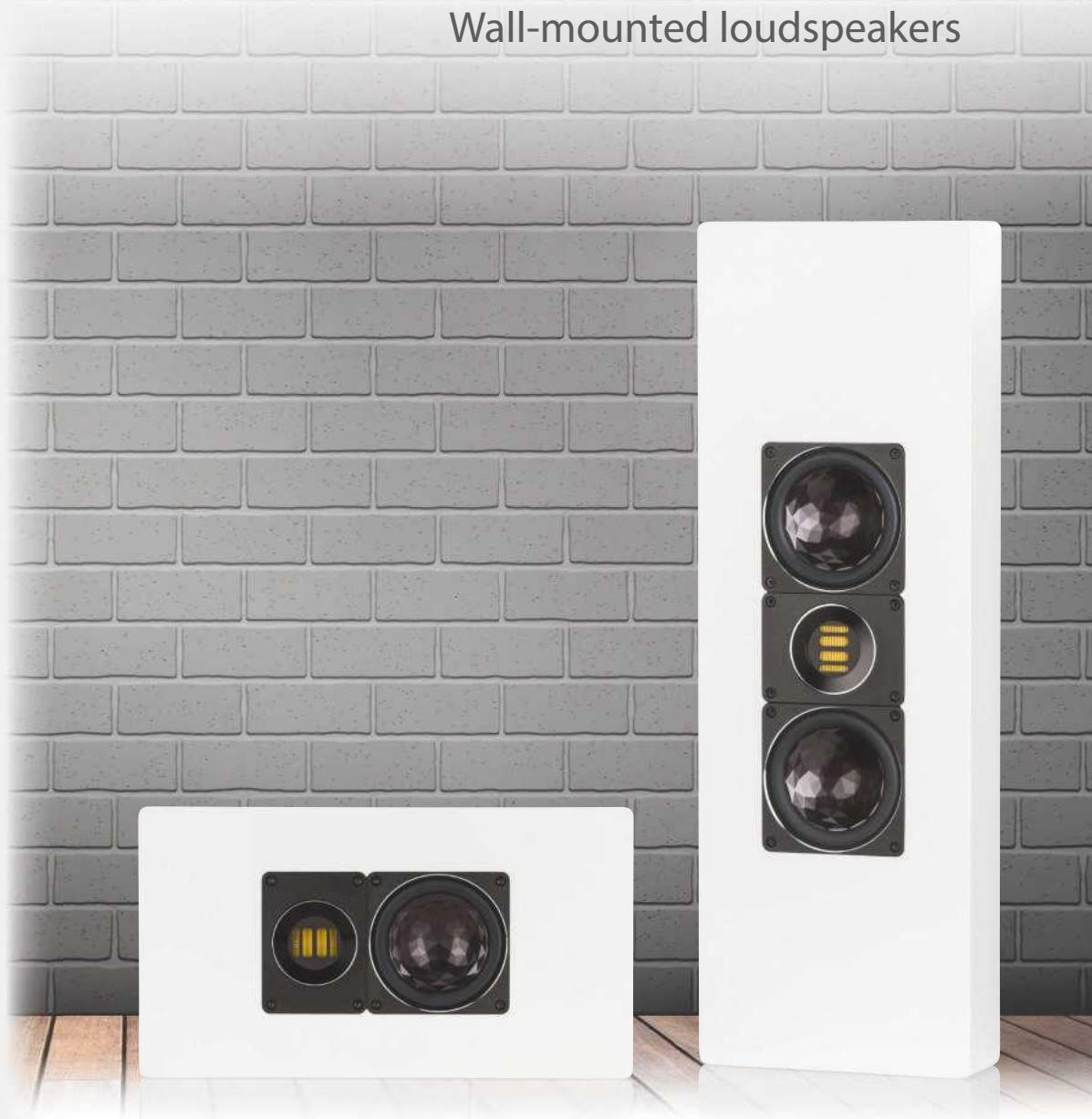
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01>JAMES BOND

Well, who else was it going to be? Undoubtedly, MI6's Commander James Bond – aka 007 – is the king of cinema secret agents, the leading light of a film franchise that has run for more the 50 years and continually triumphed at the box office – in fact, the last outing, *Skyfall*, currently ranks as the 10th highest-grossing film worldwide.

So what's the secret of Bond's success? Obviously, the action-packed movies, fast cars, saucy girls, memorable score and 007's wry sophistication appeal to the wannabe spies in all of us, but it's the producers' ability to refresh the franchise that has kept it going strong. Not only in the changes to its star that have seen Sean Connery, George Lazenby, Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, Pierce Brosnan and Daniel Craig lift the Walther PPK, but in its shifts in tone as new audiences demand new thrills – 1989's lean and mean *Licence to Kill* is far removed from the light-touch space shenanigans of *Moonraker* ten years earlier, for instance.

Nor does Bond show any sign of retiring. Craig will return to screens later this year in *Spectre*, and should make another movie in the franchise. And when he goes, someone else will step into his shoes. And tuxedo.

Get the movies: The Bond 50 boxset, released in 2012, collected 22 films together and left a space for the not-then-released *Skyfall*. It's a cracking set, with some good bonus material, but what will you do when *Spectre* arrives on BD next year?

'007 – the star of a film franchise that has run for over 50 years – appeals to the wannabe spies in all of us'



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AN AV RECEIVER is the centre point of a home cinema setup. Acting like the Commander in Chief of all your other gear, it feeds images to your display, siphons audio to your speaker array and pulls media from your connected devices. And this issue, we have a high-performance AVR – the SC-2024 – to give away to one lucky reader, courtesy of Pioneer.

Power on tap

The SC-2024 is a 7.2-channel model, with a power output of 190W per channel delivered by Pioneer's Class D Direct Energy HD technology. Performance is aided by its specially designed chassis, which is equipped with a trans-stabilizer to reduce noise and to ensure high-quality sonics, and the company's MCACC room EQ system, which optimises its sound to suit your room and speakers. Audio format support includes DTS-HD Master Audio, DTS Neo:X, Dolby TrueHD and Dolby Pro-Logic IIz.

The amp has a full array of connections, including seven HDMI inputs and twin outputs, able to passthrough 4K video signals and upscale others to Ultra HD resolution – and the second output can be used independently, sending audio/video to a separate zone. Numerous other digital and analogue inputs cater for all of your sources.

The SC-2024 is ready for your music, too. Onboard Bluetooth connectivity allows you to stream audio direct from a Smart device to the AVR, while the front USB input can handle hi-res files, including DSD and multichannel FLAC and WAV. Hook the AVR onto your home network and you can take advantage of vTuner net radio, Spotify Connect, Apple AirPlay and your own library via DLNA.

Gorgeously styled, ruggedly built and packed full of features, the SC-2024 is a true home cinema champion. Just enter our competition if you want to blag it!



Be in with a chance of winning the Pioneer SC-2024 AV receiver by answering the following film-related question:

Q: Which British actor played shark-hunter Quint in the classic movie *Jaws*?

- A)** Michael Caine
- B)** Bob Hoskins
- C)** Robert Shaw

HOW TO ENTER:

Simply email your answer (either A, B or C) to competitions@homecinemachoice.com with the subject line 'Pioneer'. You must include your name, address and contact telephone number.

The closing date for this competition is July 9, 2015. Please read the terms and conditions (below) before sending in your entry.



'Gorgeously styled, ruggedly built and packed full of features, Pioneer's SC-2024 is a true home cinema champion'

For more information on Pioneer's AV receiver lineup visit:
www.pioneer.eu/uk

Competition rules

1. The first entry drawn at random will win the prize. **2.** Only one entry per person/household; multiple entries will be discarded. **3.** Entrants from the UK only. **4.** Employees of MyTimeMedia Ltd and companies supplying competition prizes are not eligible to enter this competition. **5.** Please ensure your personal details are correct, as they will be used to contact you if you win. **6.** No alternatives, cash or otherwise, will be offered to the winner as prizes. **7.** The editor's decision is final. **8.** The closing date for entries is July 9, 2015.



Bringing back the Golden Age



Adrian Justins visits an Art Deco cinema room owned by an entrepreneur keen to give movies the love they deserve

WHO AMONG THE countless car and truck drivers that pass along the A20 to Kent from London each day would imagine that just yards from the kerb of the Sidcup Road is one of the most beautiful home cinemas in the country? Entering this spectacular picture palace is as close to being teleported as you'll get since the Star Trek Experience closed down in the Las Vegas Hilton hotel.



This is not simply a home cinema install, it is also the demo room for the firm that built it, City Home Cinemas. And it is a lot more than a technological showcase; it is without doubt the undying passion of its creator, Peter Walker (pictured), who runs City Home Cinemas (a division of property refurbishment company City Heights London) and lives in the building.

Peter believes that the cinema is equally as important as the movie. 'I hate black boxes,' he says of the drab walls found in most commercial cinemas, adding that watching the film is just one part of the experience of going to the movies. 'This room gives a sense of anticipation. Waiting for the curtains to open you get a tingle at the back of the neck.' In this room, the sense of excitement is enhanced by the sound of Mantovani's cascading strings, playing quietly as you enter, and by gently changing light hues. Just sitting in this theatre before the show begins in earnest is a pleasure.

Setting the scene

The colour scheme, lighting and use of music are only three of the critical elements in designing and running a cinema that Peter

>



Feeling in a blue mood? This cinema can help





KIT CHECKLIST

WISDOM AUDIO: 2 x L75i; 1 x C38i (centre); 4 x P20i (surround); 8 x P4i (height speakers); 2 x S90i subs (in-wall); 2 x SCS subs

OPPO: BDP-105D Blu-ray player

RED: Red-ray 4K player

KALEIDESCAP: M700 Disc Vault; IU server

RAKO: Lighting control system

CONTROL4: SR-250 remote; HC800 controller

DATASAT: RS20i audio processor (with Auro-3D); RA7300 power amplifier; RA4200 power amplifier

ADA: MPA-7500 power amplifier; PTM-8150 power amplifier; PF2502 power amplifier

AURORA: LED lighting

CINEMATECH/FURNITURE VILLAGE: Seating

STEWART FILMSCREENS: Acoustically-transparent screen with electric side-masking

DIGITAL PROJECTION: Insight 4K Laser projector

Walker insists on. He's also adamant that you should have curtains, which should only open once the projector has started running.

'It's all part of setting the scene,' he says, and he should know. While he's been in the building trade for 18 years and has recently expanded his company into doing domestic cinema installs, Peter's CV includes a decade as a cinema owner, culminating in a BFI award for being instrumental in reviving flagging cinema audiences. Why? Because in 1983, during a period of record low cinema attendances, he gave up a successful shipping company to take over the Odeon cinema in Camden's Parkway, which had recently closed. His mission was to turn it from a virtual wreck into a successful Art Deco venue. With enthusiasm, hard graft and an understanding of what people want when they go to the movies, he achieved his goal.

Right from the outset Peter insisted on running his cinema in the fashion that he remembered enjoying in his youth. He refurbished the entire building, decorating the lobby and bar in a sumptuous Art Deco style and created a magnificent auditorium with a massive screen and a capacity of over 1,000. In addition to aesthetics and comfort he only employed staff who would welcome and say farewell to customers. He reintroduced the concept of an interval, in a manner, with usherettes selling ice creams in the aisles between the trailers and the main picture.

Against the expectations of many in the movie biz, Peter's cinema proved a success, often delivering the highest takings in the UK and Europe, I'm told, and even being used for the UK premiere of *The Last of the Mohicans*. He extended the building and

added a second screen for art house movies. But despite the popularity with audiences and filmmakers the building's owners wanted to redevelop the site. After a protracted legal battle, the movie mogul was forced to quit his beloved theatre (a fruitless exercise as it still exists as a cinema).

Although he has no professional qualifications, Peter proudly told me that he personally designed both the Parkway refit and the Sidcup Road install. 'I don't employ architects or designers, and I don't use computers. I'm just good at envisaging colour schemes. I draw sketches that anyone can understand.'

Modern-day approach

The décor of the cinema may evoke memories of a bygone age but the technology is



undoubtedly cutting-edge. This install, which is converted from Peter's former office, took 3.5 years to complete, with the building work being done by City Heights' own tradesmen during occasional quiet periods in the company's hectic schedule. It was devised as far back as 2003, but work really began in earnest after Peter saw domestic 4K for the first time. Peter, who has always taken a keen interest in cinema projection technology, says that seeing the Sony VPL-VW1000ES demonstrated at ISE in 2012 was a seminal moment when he realised that digital projectors were now good enough for non-commercial use.

From a front-of-house perspective the install is well and truly finished, kitted out with Cinematech seats and LED lighting from Aurora. Yet, having bought the Sony projector, the owner isn't happy with the way things

panned out. 'By the time I managed to get some 4K software (a RED server on loan from Pinewood Studios) it turned out the projector couldn't handle the signals,' he laments. Peter lost faith with Sony and rather than pay for the projector to be upgraded, he switched his allegiance to a 1080p Digital Projection model. 'Even that could handle 4K/60p, albeit downscaling the picture,' explains Graham Goodbun, City Home Cinemas' technical manager. They have now fitted a Digital Projection 4K Insight Laser.

The projector screen was formerly a 156in non-acoustically transparent DNP model, but this has recently been replaced by a Stewart Filmscreens screen, using its brand-new TELA 80 acoustically-transparent material – the company asked to use this install room as a showcase of what its latest innovation can >

INSTALL INFO

A IT'S SHOWTIME!

'This room gives a sense of anticipation,' says the owner. 'Waiting for the curtains to open you get a tingle on your neck...'

B SITTING PRETTY

The room provides seating for up to eight, split over two tiers. Those on the front row get footstools and drinks tables

C LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

The room employs various lighting arrays to help set the scene, with LEDs from specialist Aurora

D WISE CHOICE

All the speakers are from US marque Wisdom Audio, including these multidriver Sage models, which mix a quartet of woofers with a lengthy planar magnetic high-frequency driver

do. And this change will allow the positioning of the current speaker array to be rejigged, although the company has no intention of changing the speakers from Wisdom Audio, which Peter describes as 'the best secret the world has never known.' The brand's proprietary line source planar magnetic Sage series is fitted in a seven-speaker array at ground level, along with four subwoofers ('four subs provide even dispersion, not additional slam'). A further eight height channels (front, side, rear, above) are handled by Wisdom Audio's Insight series.

Both Graham and Peter are far from enamoured by Dolby Atmos's upmixing ability from existing DVD and Blu-ray, preferring instead Auro-3D (and the soon to be released DTS-X) with existing 5.1/6.1/7.1 audio tracks for their vertical thrills. This is achieved via a Datasat RS20i processor, which Graham chose as it was the only model available with a 24-channel output able to drive the speaker

array, which has been designed to suit all 3D audio formats (Auro, Atmos and DTS-X).

I was given a demo of *Master and Commander's* DTS 5.1 soundtrack, upmixed to Auro-3D, and was comprehensively blown away by the sonic imaging that the process delivers. In the attack scene early on in the Russell Crowe flick, with the *HMS Surprise* bombarded by cannon balls, the original mix is nicely peppered with disparate effects of objects and people falling over in the lower decks. Not only was the surround mix delivered so effectively that by closing my eyes I felt like I was in the middle of the boat with the walls creaking around me, but the Auro-3D remix managed to implement the sound of action taking place on the deck above, and was precise enough to follow the sound of footsteps panning across the soundstage. Blisteringly good fun, and even the more remarkable given that this is all done by the processor to the original DTS 5.1 soundtrack.

Pressed to give a figure for how much the entire project cost, Graham Goodbun is understandably vague. 'Building works aside, audio-wise we've spent around £80,000. Projector is whatever it costs [the 4K Insight Laser is in excess of \$100,000]. Overall, I guess you can double it.'

Certainly, the City Home Cinemas install is specced to suit only the deepest of pockets because the people who built it want it to be the very best. And for Peter the idea of building a cinema that doesn't deliver the best possible sound and picture is anathema.

But what's unique is that this isn't just about what you see and hear when the lights go down, it's as much about what you experience the minute you enter the room. It might not suit everyone's tastes (they have in excess of 200 designs to work from with clients) but the magic worked on me. As Peter says: 'They've knocked them all down but we're going to rebuild them.' ■



INSTALL INFO

E PERSONAL TOUCH

The front panel of the Datasat processor displays this bespoke graphic

F MOVIES ON DEMAND

The Kaleidescape vault/player can store up to 320 DVDs/Blu-rays

G PRINCE OF 1080P

The Digital Projection Full HD PJ is now swapped out for the 4K Insight Laser model from the same brand





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* Air Studios models are SC-LX78 and SC-LX88 only

REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** LG Curved OLED TV with 4K resolution **WHARFEDALE** Standmount speaker package continues Diamond heritage **VIEWSONIC** Affordable Full HD DLP projector **DALI** Stylish soundbar speaker **ONKYO** Dolby Atmos speaker/amp package **SAMSUNG** Flagship all-in-one system **QNAP** NAS device with HDMI connectivity **OTONE** Soundbase speaker **AND MORE**

One-of-a-kind

Denon's AV receiver flagship is ready for Dolby Atmos, Auro-3D and DTS:X. See p62



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

After what feels like decades of waiting, the first 4K OLED TV is here. **John Archer** finds out if it lives up to the hype

OLED gets its groove on

FOR MANY SERIOUS home cinema enthusiasts, 4K/Ultra HD OLED screen technology has achieved an almost mythical status. This is because it's always seemed to be hovering hazily just out of reach of our eager, grasping hands. Teased, but then never delivered.

Today, though, I'm ecstatic to report that 4K OLED TV has very much entered the realm of reality. In fact, I've been living with the LG 65EC970V for over a week and can confirm that you can touch it, stroke it, gawp at it and, best of all, sit down and watch it. All without fear of it suddenly disappearing in a puff of magical smoke.

The problem with being as heavily hyped as 4K OLED is, of course, is that it sets the technology up for an almighty fall. So it's a testament to the LG 65EC970V that it doesn't feel like even a stumble.

Behold its beauty

OLED televisions tend to dazzle aesthetically. They've long wowed tech showgoers with their svelte form. This model is no different. Its combination of a curved screen and incredibly slim depth – just a couple of millimetres at its extremities – makes a stunning first impression. This sense of awe merely grows, moreover, as you take in the way the bezel and screen share the same immaculately finished plane. And the super-skinny black bezel is trimmed by a neat sliver of gleaming metal.

The worry with the 65EC970V's sensational 'barely there' slenderness is that it can't possibly leave any room for decent speakers. However, somehow LG's TV boasts a claimed 40W of power delivered by a four-channel speaker array designed by audio brand Harman/Kardon. This is the key advantage the 65EC970V

offers over LG's slightly cheaper EG960V 4K OLED models.

A slightly deeper central chunk of the TV's rear houses a fulsome set of connections. These include a quartet of HDMI inputs (including support for the 2.0 standard able to handle 4K/UHD streams at 60fps) and three USB ports, including one 3.0 effort.

The set also boasts all the usual network options, meaning you can stream multimedia from other devices and take the 65EC970V online via LG's WebOS Smart TV platform. As regular readers will know, WebOS revolutionised the Smart TV world with its slick, friendly overlaid icon-driven menus and treatment of everything as an app. Yet oddly, the 65EC970V only currently carries 2014's version of WebOS. A second-generation iteration, which offers improvements in speed and layout, can be found on the EG960V models. However, LG informs me it intends to update last year's top-end WebOS TVs to 2.0 via a firmware patch later this year.

It's important to note that the Smart system, even in this current 2014 flavour, supports both Netflix and Amazon's UHD streaming apps.

Copious calibration

Even relatively low-end LG TVs tend to offer extensive suites of calibration tools, so it's no surprise to find this premium proposition offering everything from white balance and colour management to gamma and luminance controls – including the option to >

Dual remotes are now standard across LG's high-end displays





AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Curved OLED display
with 4K resolution

POSITIONING:
LG's current OLED
flagship

PEERS:
Samsung JS9500;
Panasonic AX902

Slim, curved and capable of cinematic brilliance...

adjust the 'OLED brightness', as well as a standard brightness adjustment. And if buyers want to give their new screen a proper picture fettling, the TV carries two ISF picture preset slots that a trained Imaging Science Foundation engineer could use for Day and Night picture calibrations.

The LG 4K OLED naturally supports 3D. While this format appears to be in a state of potentially terminal decline these days, it's a function that I'd rather have than not. The EC970V employs LG's Passive system, with six pairs of glasses included. Passive technology sees a reduction in image resolution compared to the Active format still used by LG's chief rival Samsung, but has really come into its own with the arrival of 4K displays. Hopefully I'll be impressed with it again in this implementation.

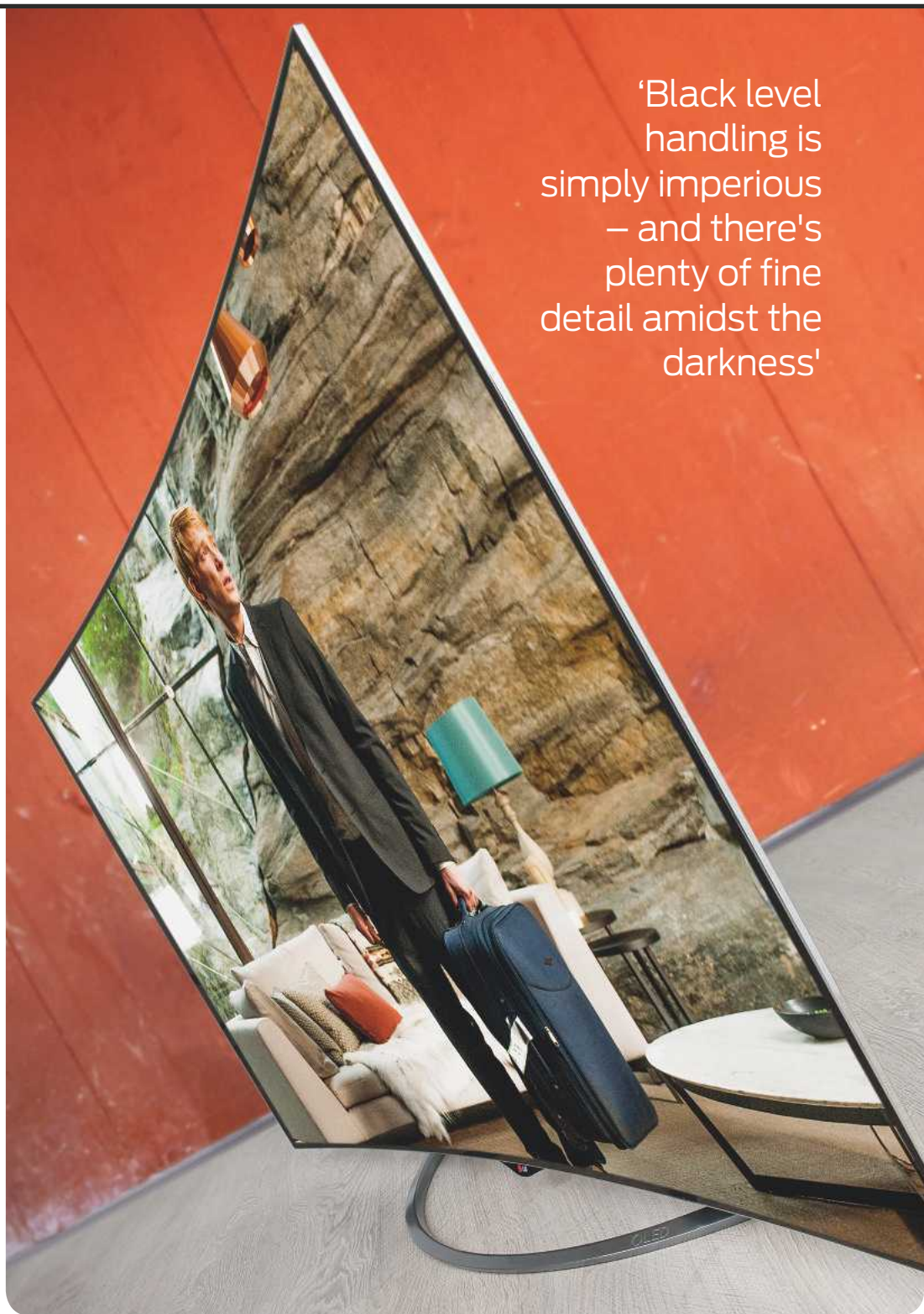
Individual charm

So why is OLED TV the subject of so much hype? The principal reason is that every one of its display's pixels (3,840 x 2,160 in this case) makes its own light and colour; pixels don't have to share an external illumination source, which is the case with LED screens. This raises the prospect of vastly enhanced contrast and colour performance, a prospect the 65EC970V largely delivers on.

Its black level handling, in particular, is simply imperious. Provided you've got the brightness and OLED brightness settings nailed (more on this presently), parts of the picture that should look black genuinely look black. Not the shade of grey seen with LCD screens, but absolutely black. This is a wondrous sight to behold with extreme contrast home cinema fare like *Gravity* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings*.

A well-calibrated 65EC970V underlines its incredible black level response by revealing oodles of fine details amidst the darkness. The most gobsmacking evidence of this reveals itself in the shot of Sandra Bullock floating helplessly against a backdrop of the enormity of space in *Gravity*. On the 65EC970V I could see what felt like thousands more stars than I'd ever seen on any TV before. Even the high-brightness, direct-LED panels of Samsung's SUHD TVs don't get close to revealing the same galactic subtlety. It's an incredible achievement that also translates, to some extent, to any dark film sequence you care to watch. Often I felt that I was seeing such scenes again for the very first time.

I've often found over the years that good black levels lead to good colours. So you won't be surprised to learn that the 65EC970V's spectacular black levels lead to pretty spectacular hues. During the footage of Pharaoh Ramses' luxurious, stylishly-lit palace in *Exodus*, tones look explosively vibrant and well-saturated. Yet at the same time



'Black level handling is simply imperious – and there's plenty of fine detail amidst the darkness'

there's nothing cartoonish or overblown about these rich hues; for the most part they seem realistic and help pictures appear adorably solid and tangible.

The addition of a 4K/UHD resolution to OLED's self-emissive nature works a charm. Native UHD content puts to bed emphatically the pixellated look of LG's Full HD OLED TVs. Instead, my UHD test footage comes across as brilliantly detailed, textured, full of depth and lifelike. The sharpness isn't too badly affected by motion either, despite the fact that some unwanted side effects make LG's motion processing system best avoided.

The impressive colours and some reasonably punchy peak whites join with the Stygian black levels to deliver a subjectively superb sense of contrast, even if LG's OLED technology certainly can't deliver the same brightness extremes as Samsung's JS9000 and JS9500 HDR-capable LED TVs.

Stiff competition

My mention of Samsung's High Dynamic Range sets marks a good point to get into the 65EC970V's weaknesses, in so far as they can be called that. First, while colours are impactful and pure, they do sometimes lack



The screen is LG's first 4K-res OLED model

a little finesse compared with the best rivals. Skin tones in, particular, can sometimes exhibit colours that appear in 'patches' rather than ultra-smooth, natural blends. Even with native 4K content.

Head-to-head comparisons also revealed that the 65EC970V's upscaling of Full HD and standard-definition content to 3,840 x 2,160 resolution isn't as effective as that of Samsung's JS9000 and JS9500 series, leaving softer, less detailed results. And 4K upscaling will continue to be a serious home cinema concern for some time.

The LG's pictures are substantially less bright than those of Samsung's HDR sets, which is to be expected. There's less sheer visceral impact – despite the outstanding contrast performance – especially if viewing in well-lit environments. And the OLED screen's relative lack of luminance means I doubt it couldn't do justice to HDR content even if it was capable of parsing such material. Which, of course, it isn't. It's a next-gen TV, just not in every sense.

The most surprising word of caution about the 65EC970V's pictures is that you can actually mess its black level performance up if you're not very careful with its settings. Keep the brightness too low – as actually occurs with the TV's presets – and you lose some of the spectacular shadow detailing. Set it too high, though, and unexpectedly you start to see a muted yellow glow creep into areas that should look black. What's more, the brightness of this glow reduces as it extends towards the screen's edges, suggesting that despite OLED's self-emissive nature the screen may not be able to deliver a uniform luminance level.

Thankfully, though, tweaking of the TV's brightness, OLED brightness and contrast settings (I chose 55 for brightness, around 80 for contrast, and over 90 for the OLED

brightness) can achieve a seriously satisfying balance between the glowing effect, lost shadow detail and brightness inconsistencies.

In fact, having just gone through a list of niggles, I'll be completely clear about this: a finely-tuned 65EC970V is capable of making today's content standards, at least, look astonishing. You'll want to grab a pile of Blu-rays, load up the biscuit tin and lock yourself away for a week.

It's also a brilliant TV for 3D if you're still in to that. The native UHD resolution and LG's Passive 3D system reveals detail galore from the pristine 3D presentation of *Exodus*, as well as a stunning sense of space and depth for Ridley Scott's typically epic shots thanks to its solid contrast performance. What's more, it does all of this without suffering a trace of crosstalk noise.

The onboard Harman/Kardon sound system is a solid cut above the flat TV norm too, delivering respectable amounts of power, range and clarity. Adding an external sound system is less pressing a priority than I would have expected, although any buyer should want a genuine multichannel setup to partner these crisp, largescreen visuals.

Better late than never

The arrival of Samsung's HDR-ready SUHD TVs certainly makes the 65EC970V a considered choice rather than the absolute no-brainer it would have been had it come out last year, when it was scheduled to. It's also a pity that LG's UHD upscaling processing is less effective than that of some rival brands. Nonetheless, this pricey, curved model still often makes modern sources look as good as they ever have, with a potent blend of contrast and colour punch. In doing so it does little to dent my long-held view that if manufacturing costs can be reduced, OLED still looks like the future of television ■

ON THE MENU



→ The user interface here is the original – and very intuitive – WebOS platform. It should get a firmware update to WebOS 2.0 in the future

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes, Passive

4K: Yes, 3,840 x 2,160

TUNER: Yes (Freeview HD)

CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB; RGB Scart; RS-232; headphone jack; composite video input; component video input; Ethernet; built-in Wi-Fi; optical digital audio output; RF input

SOUND: 40W via Harman/Kardon system

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A

CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A

DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1447.4(w) x 827(h) x 57(d)mm

WEIGHT: 23.2kg

OTHER FEATURES: OLED display; WebOS Smart System; HEVC codec 4K streaming support; OLED light adjustment; Tru Ultra HD Engine Pro; Triple XD Engine; nine picture modes; ISF calibration; noise reduction; resolution upscaler; Dynamic Colour Enhancer; media playback via network/USB; Screen Mirroring

HCC VERDICT



LG 65EC970V

→ £6,000 approx → www.lg.com/uk
→ Tel: 0844 847 5454

HIGHS: Incredible black levels/contrast; unprecedented shadow detailing; gorgeous native UHD playback; stellar 3D; fine design

LOWS: UHD upscaling only average; occasional lack of colour finesse; no HDR support

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Danny Phillips sees if the new jewels in Wharfedale's standmount speaker crown have some home cinema sparkle

Diamonds are forever

IN 2013, WHARFEDALE'S dazzling Diamond 100 HCP speaker package hit the sweet spot between price and performance, making it one of the best budget 5.1 systems of the year. The only thing wrong was the speakers' underwhelming build quality.

Fast-forward two years and Wharfedale is putting that right with its successor, the 200 series. This new range bolsters build quality with upgraded cabinets, a swankier finish and a tweaked bass reflex system, all designed to improve the system both



aesthetically and acoustically. It's evolution not revolution, but given the superb price-defying performance of the 100 system no one would expect major changes.

So what we have here is a 200 series 'starter pack' featuring two pairs of the Diamond 220 standmounts – the larger of two standmount models in the range – plus the 220C centre speaker and the same SPC-10 active subwoofer that accompanied the 100 HCP package. Bought individually these speakers would cost £900, but the package price nets you a £50 saving. Even more impressive is that the Diamond 220 HCP costs £100 less than its predecessor, which is, quite frankly, bananas in this tough economic climate.

Lash of lacquer

A close look at the Diamond 220 reveals a much improved design, with the new lacquered baffle adding a touch of class missing from the

Diamond 121's plasticky fascia. Our black samples are particularly snazzy, gleaming like a Beemer in the Blackwall tunnel, but the system also comes in less imposing white, walnut and rosewood finishes.

Silver driver surrounds and removable round cloth grilles finish the look off nicely, while a plinth at the bottom provides a sturdy foundation, as well as playing an important role in the speaker's bass performance.

My only design reservation concerns their unadventurous box shape, which might not suit rooms with more contemporary décor. As a fan of curvy, elegant-looking speakers, I think there are more exciting standmount systems out there – Q Acoustics' 3000 package being one.

The solid, weighty cabinet sports a fetching wood grain finish, underneath which is a sandwich of particleboard between layers of MDF. This combination acts to reduce the sort

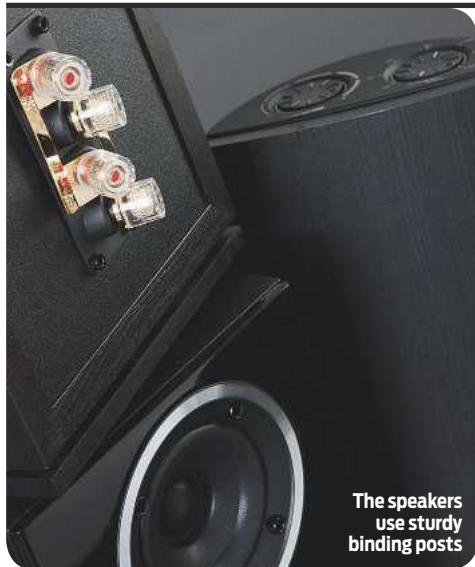
of colouration and 'hear-through' you'd get from an MDF-only cabinet. It's an idea borrowed from Wharfedale's high-end Jade series, cabinets built from a matrix of particleboard and MDF called Crystalam. This simpler sandwich arrangement doesn't quite achieve the same standard, but offers similar results at a lower cost.

For drivers, the 220s use 5in woven Kevlar cones with semi-elliptical 'break-up' areas on the surface, and 1in soft-dome tweeters – identical to the 100 series.

Wharfedale also keeps faith with the Slot-Loaded Distributed Port system introduced on this range's predecessor. Unlike most speakers, which channel air through a round port on the front or rear, the Diamonds push air through a port at the base of the speaker and through a 5mm gap created by the plinth. The manufacturer says this has been further refined with added

The Diamond 220 speakers use Wharfedale's Slot-Loaded port for improved bass response





The speakers use sturdy binding posts

airflow control at the port exit to minimise turbulence and distortion. The result, promises Wharfedale, is deep, articulate and well-integrated bass, without the chuffing that can occur with front- or rear-mounted ports. It also means you're less restricted when placing them, as they can be situated nearer to a rear wall than conventional speakers.

Taking centre stage

The same Slot-Loaded technology is now used by the 220C centre; its forebear employed a downward-firing reflex port but not the plinth. This potentially makes it a better match for the other speakers. It's horizontally aligned and features two 5in drivers either side of its HF unit.

'The natural crispness in the highs and forthright midrange provide plenty of dynamic thrills'

The final upgrades from the 100 series are an enhanced bass motor system, designed to make the speakers easier to drive and boost transient power, and tweaked crossovers that improve integration between drivers.

Wharfedale's £250 SPC-10 PowerCube is once again called into service, heading into battle armed with its 10in long-throw driver and 215W amplifier. The compact size and black wood finish make it one of the better-looking subs on the market, although pedantic readers will notice that it's still not a cube.

You can optimise performance using volume and crossover controls, helpfully placed on top. Thanks to a built-in motion sensor they light up when your hand approaches, an unexpectedly cool feature to find on an affordable subwoofer.

Setup is simple. I didn't have to spend ages moving the speakers around or bother toeing them in – they delivered a fulsome and

focused sound from basically wherever they were placed.

Now it can't be easy improving performance while knocking £100 off the price tag but somehow Wharfedale has managed it with this array. Powered by my usual Onkyo TX-NR818, the 220 HCP delivers an assured and articulate performance for the money.

Its stand-out attribute is detail. When Smaug attacks Lake Town at the start of *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*, the scene sparkles with nuance and texture. Blasts of dragon fire have an effervescent top-end crackle and smashed-up wooden buildings splinter and snap like they do in real life.

Quieter moments on the shores of Lake Town are teeming with chattering voices, crunchy footsteps and lapping water. Not only is this utterly absorbing but it also makes the soundstage airy and spacious, which intensifies the drama when Smaug starts swooping between speakers.

The sound is also surprisingly refined. The 220s don't get overly aggressive or shouty to convey excitement – instead the tone is smooth and easy, but the natural crispness in the highs and forthright midrange provide all the dynamism you need.

The system doesn't have any trouble conveying scale either, belting out Peter Jackson's epic battles with gusto. Footsteps thump in unison as armies of orcs, dwarves and elves pour into every inch of the screen, while an exhilarating tapestry of combat effects come at you from every direction. And when trolls and earth-eaters enter the battle, the SPC-10 sub steps in and boosts the soundstage with explosive bass. Aptly, I felt dwarfed by the size and loudness of it all.

Keeping faith with this sub was a good move – its low frequencies integrate tightly with the Slot-Loaded bass from the 220s, ensuring a unified, non-directional sound. It's also impressively agile and well controlled.

Battle of the bargain boys

It really is hard to find fault with the Diamond 220 HCP at this price. In fact, the only thing Wharfedale is battling against is the quality of the competition – systems like the aforementioned Q Acoustics 3000 undercut it in price (by around £150 depending on finish) and, in my experience, deliver even greater refinement.

So, just like Andy Murray is regularly thwarted at Grand Slams because he happens to play in the same era as Djokovic, Nadal and Federer, Wharfedale will find it hard to totally sink its formidable rivals in this arena price point. But that doesn't alter the fact that the Diamond 220 HCP is an astonishingly good speaker system that further enhances the reputation of this British brand. Buyers won't be disappointed ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DIAMOND 220

DRIVE UNITS: 5in woven Kevlar bass driver; 1in soft-dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Slot-Loaded Distributed Port
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 56Hz-20kHz
SENSITIVITY: 86dB
POWER HANDLING: 25-100W
DIMENSIONS: 174(w) x 315(h) x 227(d)mm
WEIGHT: 5.3kg

DIAMOND 220C

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 5in woven Kevlar bass drivers; 1in soft-dome tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Slot-Loaded Distributed Port
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 60Hz-20kHz
SENSITIVITY: 89dB
POWER HANDLING: 25-150W
DIMENSIONS: 470(w) x 190(h) x 236(d)mm
WEIGHT: 8.5kg

SPC-10 POWERCUBE (SUBWOOFER)

DRIVE UNITS: 10in long-throw cone driver
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 35Hz-120Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 215W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 352(w) x 382(h) x 305(d)mm
WEIGHT: 11.4kg
CONNECTIONS: Stereo line in; LFE line in; stereo speaker-level input

HCC VERDICT



Wharfedale Diamond 220 HCP

→ £850 approx → www.wharfedale.co.uk
 → Tel: 01480 452561

HIGHS: Extremely detailed and insightful sound; huge scale and bass weight; excellent integration; unfussy about placement; much improved looks and build

LOWS: Safe, boxy cabinets; rivals are cheaper

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



The best soundbar?

The experts think so...



Home Cinema Choice 'Best Buy',
July 2014



Trusted Reviews 'Recommended',
October 2014



What Hi-Fi? Awards 2014,
'Product of the Year'



AV Forums 'Highly Recommended',
July 2014

techradar

Tech Radar '1st in Tech Radars
Top 10 soundbars', March 2015



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AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Tallboy 7.1-channel
AV system

POSITIONING:
Samsung's new
flagship

PEERS:
Sony BDV-N7200;
LG BH9540TW;
Panasonic
SC-BTT880

'The subwoofer adds
depth and authority,
and is instrumental
to the system's ability
to convey scale'



This new tallboy package from Samsung dazzles **Danny Phillips** with its multitude of features. But how does it sound?

Everything but the kitchen sink!

LIKE DIET COKE or Quorn, all-in-one home cinema systems aren't as appetizing as the real thing, but most buyers are willing to turn a blind eye to design corner-cutting and flawed sound for the sake of lower prices and the convenience of getting everything in one fell swoop.

Yet when it comes to Samsung's premium systems, it's not that simple. As we learned from 2013's overpriced HT-F9750W, they're not cheap – you could, at a stretch, assemble a decent separates system for the same price as this new one-box effort – so it needs a sparkling performance to justify the asking price.

As per usual, Samsung starts by cramming the flagship HT-J7750W full of the latest tricks and features. Like the F9750W and last year's HT-H7750W, this package boasts Neo:Fusion II processing – the fruits of a partnership between DTS and Samsung – which works in tandem with swivelling top drivers in the tallboy speakers to deliver a high and expansive soundstage. Which, when you think about it, is a similar idea to Dolby Atmos, albeit without the object-based ethos.

Nothing has changed on the design front since last year either. The gloss-black main unit, which houses the 3D Blu-ray player and amplifier, is sleek and minimal, with an LED display, disc tray and touch-sensitive controls adorning the fascia. It's predictably light and plasticky, but firmly bolted together.

The curved right-hand side follows the outline of a porthole on top that shows off the valve amplifier – a regular feature of Samsung's top-end systems.

Plenty of plugs to play with

TV receivers and games consoles can be connected to the two HDMI inputs on the back, both of which support 3D and 4K passthrough. The ARC-enabled HDMI output lets you enjoy programmes from your TV's tuner without

having to connect another cable. You also get optical and analogue stereo inputs, plus FM aerial and Ethernet ports.

The tallboy speakers for the fronts and rears come in three bits – a heavy hexagonal base, a top section housing the drivers and a hollow section that links the two. (In our photography, only the fronts are mounted on their base sections).

The main speaker section is surprisingly well made by usual all-in-one standards, with drivers encased in a robust metal mesh, but the middle section is flimsy and the towers wobble when you give them a nudge.

They look nice from afar, though, and on the back of the front towers, you'll find a switch that tilts the top driver upwards. This mechanism is clunky but you shouldn't need to play around with it too much.

Thankfully the centre speaker is cut from the same cloth as the tallboys' top section. It points upwards when placed on a flat surface to compensate when sited below a TV.

Clutterphobes will welcome the inclusion of a wireless receiver that feeds the rear speakers and banishes wiring to the back of the room.

Samsung has resisted the urge to move to the 'Multi Air Gap' subwoofer that accompanies its new soundbars and here sticks with the same sub as previous systems. It's an attractive, compact cuboid, but the hollow plastic enclosure isn't up to the standard I'd expect at this price.

Smart cookie

The HT-J7750W's feature list reads like a home cinema A-Z. Samsung's range of Smart



content, accessed over the built-in Wi-Fi connection or Ethernet, is best-in-class. Navigate your way to the Samsung Apps menu and you'll discover all the usual catch-up/VOD suspects, including Netflix, BBC iPlayer, Blinkbox and Amazon. That alone would suffice for most systems, but Samsung backs it up with an avalanche of other apps, games and puzzles (admittedly of varying quality).

While connected you can stream videos and music from other devices on your network. The system happily played everything I threw at it, including hi-res FLAC (up to 96kHz/24-bit), MKV, DivX and AVCHD. >

Alternatively, you can play your media files from USB sticks.

The wireless fun continues with Bluetooth, Screen Mirroring and multiroom support. The latter lets you incorporate the HT-J7750W into a system alongside Samsung's wireless M3/M5/M7 speakers and stream music from the Multiroom smartphone app.

There's also a bunch of sound modes to play with, mimicking the acoustic properties of music venues across the globe. So if you hanker for the intimate atmosphere of a Jazz Club in Seoul or the echoey grandeur of a Philharmonic Hall in Bratislava, you'll be in seventh heaven. Me? I'll leave them well alone, thanks.

Before you can play with any of this though, you'll need to book a day off work to put it all

'Angle the front speakers' top drivers upwards and the sense of height really improves'

together. Setup is a laborious task – my floor was covered in more cables, screws, boxes and bits of plastic than Emmett Brown's lab.

Fire up the system and the bold onscreen menus make operation easy. Samsung has removed the perfunctory Movies & TV Shows section from the Home screen, which leaves more room to manoeuvre. A couple of the menus are sluggish to respond but it pulls up DLNA files, apps and other content quickly.

To protect and serve...

Sonically the HT-J7750W is an exciting listen, offering an impressive sense of scale and a dynamic, biting tone that stays the right side of brash. You don't have to turn the volume knob very far to coax a room-filling sound out of it. The 2014 *RoboCop* remake is a rubbish film but a cracking test disc, and I headed straight for the exhilarating warehouse training sequence. Pitting

The handset is nicely uncluttered



Drivers are kept safe behind a mesh grille

his wits against the automated EM-208s, Robo lets off a volley of shots with a visceral crack, while his foes return the favour from all around the room – every shot was clear and purposefully placed.

Samsung's one-box systems are known for their crisp, clinical sound and the HT-J7750W is no exception. High frequencies fizz, from the delicate mechanical click of the guns to the gentle

whirr of Robo's electronics as he powers through the warehouse. Treble can sound a bit thin at louder volumes, lacking the silky, refined touch you get from better-quality hi-fi speakers – but at least the soundstage is open and spacious.

The sense of space is augmented further by DTS Neo:Fusion II, which matrixes audio from the rest of the soundmix. Angle the top drivers upwards and the impression of height improves, demonstrated by expansive echoes and gunshots that sound like they're coming from up in the rafters.

Deep bass from the subwoofer adds depth and authority. It's instrumental in the system's ability to convey scale, rumbling heartily during every explosion. But there's little deviation in its performance – it either rumbles or it doesn't – and could do with being a lot tighter.

Blu-ray picture quality is superb, however. Razor-sharp detail, rich colours and sharply drawn edges result in a deep, immersive image whether it's 2D or 3D. Tonal blends are smooth, skin tones look natural and fast-movement is keenly tracked. UHD upscaling might appeal to owners of 4K tellies but the difference on my Samsung UE55HU7500 is negligible.

Decent performer

Overall the HT-J7750W is an impressive all-in-one system, with a stylish design and enough features to soften the blow of its price tag. It also delivers a decent performance – boosted by clever DTS tech – but a few sound quality issues rain on the parade and build quality really should be better. And I do wish these systems arrived pre-assembled...

If you're willing to accept such flaws as part and parcel of the all-in-one experience then this is a worthwhile purchase ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes
UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI inputs; ARC HDMI output; optical digital input; analogue stereo input; FM aerial input; Ethernet port
SACD/DVD-A PLAYBACK: No/No
DTS-HD/DOLBY TRUEHD DECODING: Yes/Yes
CLAIMED POWER OUTPUT: 1,330W
DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 430(w) x 55(h) x 312(d)mm
WEIGHT (MAIN UNIT): 2.7kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; DTS Neo:Fusion II; DLNA file streaming; Samsung Apps; multiroom support; Screen Mirroring; Bluetooth; MP3, WMA, AAC, WAV, FLAC, ALAC, AIFF, OGG, AVI, MKV, DivX, WMV playback; MP3 Enhancer; Power Bass; Virtual 7.1; sound presets; dual core processor

HCC VERDICT



Samsung HT-J7750W

→ £800 approx → www.samsung.com/uk
 → Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Powerful, dynamic sound; big soundstage; loads of features; sleek design; good-looking menus
LOWS: Bass needs more punch and agility; overall sound lacks finesse; uninspiring speaker build; takes ages to set up

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Canton DM50

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Black, White and Silver



"Performance is excellent"
HOME CINEMA CHOICE

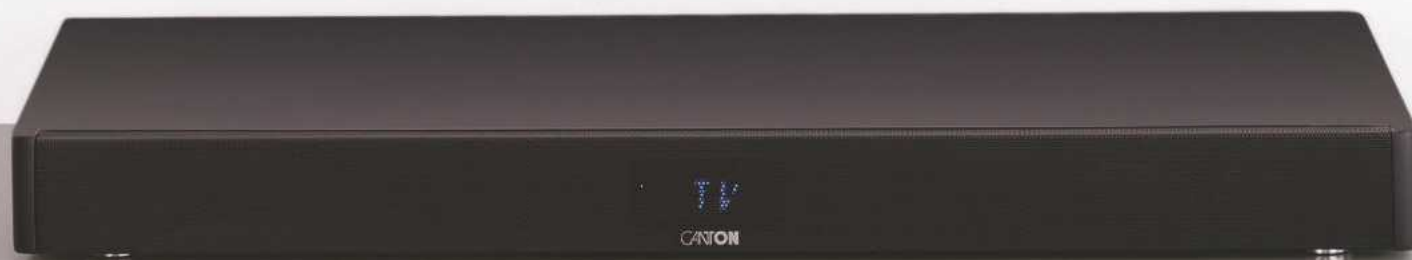
"A lesson in what a soundbase
should sound and look like"
WHAT HIFI

"Hands down the best sounding
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TRUSTED REVIEWS

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John Lewis

Does this beautiful-looking audio upgrade also deliver sonic thrills? **Adrian Justins** takes a front row seat

Soundbar with catwalk ambition



'The bar is fashioned from a single piece of extruded aluminium to reduce colouration and distortion'

SOUNDBARS ARE SOMETHING of a compromise, constrained by the size and shape of their cabinets, and they are sometimes regarded with contempt by home cinema enthusiasts and manufacturers. Such misguided folk have been looking at things from the wrong angle...

Comparing soundbars with full-fat surround sound systems, rather than the weedy little speakers that are built-in to televisions and which they are designed to replace, does them a disservice. And for those situations (eg. supplementary screens in bedrooms, offices, etc) where surround sound simply isn't a realistic proposition, a soundbar is the sonic equivalent of going from factory-

produced scones with squirry cream to an afternoon tea at the Ritz.

DALI is based in Denmark, where it has designed and built (largely by hand) audiophile-quality speakers for over 30 years. Inspired perhaps by the success of B&W's Panorama 2, Monitor Audio's ASB-2 and higher-end models from Yamaha such as the all-singing, all-dancing YSP-2500, the

company has finally nailed its colours to the soundbar mast in the guise of the Kubik One. DALI's debut in the active speaker arena, however, was the Kubik Free, a portable Bluetooth model which I was impressed by.

DALI refuses to call the Kubik One a soundbar, preferring instead the label of 'sound system', because the model has a range of inputs including wireless Bluetooth and because it can handle 24-bit/96kHz music files. But DALI is not the first to have embraced these ideas and a cynic might say that the choice of name is arguably to mask its shortcomings, in terms of its home cinema spec, given its premium price tag. It has no HDMI inputs, no wireless subwoofer and no decoders for Dolby Digital and DTS, favouring >

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Premium soundbar with Bluetooth

POSITIONING:
DALI's debut soundbar

PEERS:
Yamaha YSP-2500; Monitor Audio ASB-2





Looking for HDMI? You'll be disappointed

PCM all the way, which is input via either of its two optical inputs.

From an imperfect start, though, let's focus on the positives. Certainly, the Kubik One is a substantial and impressively designed object with eye-catching contemporary looks. Colour-wise, it laughs mockingly at the ubiquitous black and silver finishes favoured by most other makers and gives you grille options of black, white or red. Additionally, you can order a replacement grille in blue, lime green, orange, purple, grey or so-called petrol green.

The Kubik One has four separately powered drivers – two soft textile 1in dome tweeters and two 5.25in wood fibre mid/bass cones. The frequency range is rated at 48Hz-22kHz, with the crossover set to 3kHz.

Fashioned from a single piece of extruded aluminium that aims to reduce coloration and distortion, the unit weighs a hefty 9kg and there's not a hard or square edge to be seen. All in all, it's tougher and better turned out than Chris Eubank at a Buckingham Palace garden party. Low-loss rubber surrounds and a glass reinforced polymer basket complete the premium-quality construction. I won't linger on the plasticky remote control, which DALI says it is in the process of replacing with a better-quality metal one.

LED's play the music

The vertical strip on the Kubik One's front has LEDs that light up depending on the mode or status. These are too small to be decipherable from more than a few feet away. On the bar's top are some operational controls.

The recessed jack pack is laudably designed so that thickly braided cables can be used and the cable management system ensures that wires don't protrude and prevent the soundbar being installed flush against a wall. As well as dual opticals, there is stereo phono, a subwoofer line out and a microUSB port (which is for a PC or Mac only, plus an iPad if using Apple's camera connector).

Set up and operation is straightforward as all you can do using the remote is power on/off, change the source and adjust the volume. Round the back are controls for setting the bass level (three presets), a manual power mode button (for preventing the unit going in

to standby) and a gain adjust knob for matching the analogue input level to the digital sources.

With wide-dispersion drivers designed in-house, there can be no excuses for not hitting the sonic heights expected of such a premium-priced unit. Indeed there is much to admire about the Kubik One's performance. The power output is impressive for the size of the thing, and volume can be dialled up without fear of distortion or strain.

Some soundbars require hard work with the EQ adjustment to get the best out of them. Once the bass output is set on the rear of the unit, that's not an option here, which happily pays off for DALI, as the Kubik One turns out a solid, even-handed sound that's consistent throughout the dynamic range.

Sport such as live football is controlled so that the commentator's vocals are nicely balanced against the roar of the crowd. Like Q Acoustics' Media 4, the lack of a subwoofer generally proves a moot point, with the soundbar itself providing better than expected slam and extension. The soundtrack to *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* is nicely handled, so that as the spaghetti tornado rips through town and giant portions of mince bounce on the ground, the bass is suitably chunky. Individual objects such as cars, a man in a bathtub and tin cans can be picked out as they hurtle along, panning nicely across the soundstage. Meanwhile, Flint's dialogue is pleasingly solid and resonant.

Musically, the model is a joy. Streamed over Bluetooth from a laptop, a 24/96 download of *Little Lies* by Fleetwood Mac has terrific vocal detail whilst the introductory bass to Jacko's *Billie Jean* is purposeful and well defined.

Going for glamour?

All told, the Kubik One is a highly competent performer, with no noteworthy chink in its performance armour. The benchmark for soundbars in this price is Yamaha's far more versatile YSP-2500, which also outperforms in terms of low-frequency power and sonic clarity – DALI's offering is much easier to operate, and much more stylish. If you like a bit of glam in your movie room, you'd be silly not to give it serious consideration ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 1in soft textile dome tweeters; 2 x 5.25in wood fibre cone mid/bass drivers
AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED): 100W
CONNECTIONS: 2 x digital optical; analogue stereo phono; 3.5mm mini jack; microUSB; subwoofer line out
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No
SEPARATE SUB: No
REMOTE CONTROL: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 980(w) x 162(h) x 102(d)mm
WEIGHT: 9.6kg
FEATURES: Wall-mounting; Bluetooth 3.0 aptX; Class D amplifier; claimed frequency response of 48Hz-22kHz; one-piece aluminium chassis; interchangeable front fabric grille; IR learning; Auto standby option; gain adjust; bass output slider selector

HCC VERDICT



DALI Kubik One

→ £800 approx → www.dali-uk.co.uk

→ Tel: 0845 644 3537

HIGHS: Uncompromising build quality; stylish design; even, powerful sound

LOWS: Bass extension not amazing; no HDMI inputs/output; lacks onboard Dolby Digital or DTS decoding

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

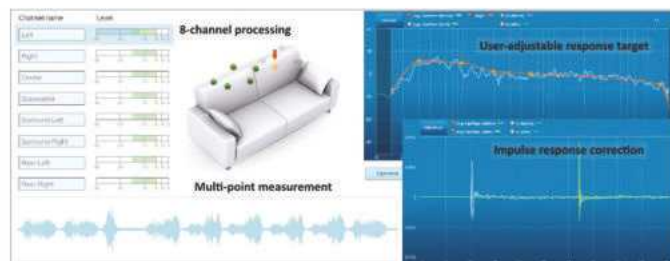
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62 DENON AVR-X7200WA → £2,500 approx



Denon favours a button-free front panel design

Steve May welcomes Denon's future-proofed top-flight AV receiver into his home cinema

Edge of tomorrow

DENON'S AVR-X7200WA APPEARS

deceptively conservative – its design is prim and uncluttered. Looking at it, you wouldn't know it was the most cutting-edge multichannel audio machine on the market.

There are fascia controls, but these are predictably hidden from plain sight. For symmetry, volume and source selection knobs sandwich a large, clear display, just as they've always done since time immemorial.

Beneath the bonnet, though, this receiver is a fevered frenzy of tech, promiscuously embracing every aspect of new home cinema technology known to man, from immersive 3D audio to 4K HDMI. It's an unapologetic evangelist for tomorrow's movie room.

Choose your aural weapon

The AVR-X7200WA is a nine-channel design, but can handle up to eleven channels with the help of additional stereo amplification. Naturally, it's Dolby Atmos-enabled out of the box. You can choose a 5.1.4 Dolby Atmos configuration (four height speakers, down-firing ceiling models or upfiring Dolby-enabled), or a 7.1.2 (two heights). It's also firmware upgradable to Auro-3D, and later this year will similarly accommodate DTS:X. The good news is the boffins at Denon tell me that there's room for both firmware top-ups, so you won't need to choose between them. In current integrated AVR terms, it's unique.

Connectivity is extensive. There are seven rear-placed HDMI inputs able to handle 4K 60Hz. You also get three HDMI outputs, two for dual screen/projector use plus an additional zone. Beneath the front flap is a bonus HDMI, plus composite AV and USB. The receiver will upscale sources to 1080p and 2160p/60Hz.

Denon's sombre remote features a small LCD display



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
9.2-channel Dolby Atmos home cinema receiver

POSITIONING:
The highest specified of Denon's current AVR range

PEERS:
Onkyo TX-NR3030;
Pioneer SC-LX88

This is what the back of a serious AVR looks like...



There are also four digital audio inputs (two coaxial, two optical), plus Denon Link HD, which is used in tandem with a compatible Denon disc spinner (if you have one – I don't) for a jitter-reduced connection.

The receiver has integrated Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. Two optional antenna are provided.

A word of clarification. In all likelihood, new buyers will end up bagging an AVR-X7200WA. This is an updated iteration of the AVR-X7200W, featuring HDCP 2.2 copy protection required for use with UHD Blu-ray and broadcast services when they begin. The 'A' suffix indicates there's the latest Panasonic HDMI interface onboard, which offers HDCP 2.2 with full 4:4:4 colour subsampling. If you have a first-generation X7200W (that amp was launched earlier this year), Denon offers an upgrade which requires a physical HDMI board swap, at a cost of £150. You might still find that model on sale for a while. Note that if you don't opt to get the HDCP 2.2 overhaul, the X7200W will still be ready for DTS:X.

At the weigh in...

While this is Denon's top-line AVR, it's neither overly large nor super-hefty, tipping the scales at a manageable 17.1kg. Thankfully it doesn't sound like a lightweight.

There's no 11-channel AVR (to rival Onkyo's TX-NR3030) positioned above the X7200WA, so some level of compromise will be required when it comes to speaker deployment. For the bulk of our audition, this amp was run in a 7.1.2 Atmos configuration.

Build quality is high. The unit features a left/right-separated internal design and sports custom-made Denon High Current Transistors. But this Denon doesn't just

impress through hardware. To win over users, AVR engineers of late have had to make their kit a good deal more approachable than they did in the past. To this end, Denon proffers the Setup Assistant, which handholds post-unboxing.

The overall UX is nice. Engage Setup and your video source is overlaid, so you don't lose track of who's doing what to whom on *Big Brother*. The Setup menu itself sub-divides into Audio, Video, Inputs, Speakers, Network, General and the aforementioned Assistant, which facilitates speaker setup, calibration, networking and input management. To help shoelace the unit, the receiver graphically illustrates where to stick your wires. There's also pictorial height speaker prompting for a variety of solutions – front, top, middle, rear. It's much better than having to refer to a manual...

Auto calibration is provided through Audyssey MultEQ XT32. This can measure up to eight points around the listening position. Once done, you can elect to engage Dynamic EQ for late-night listening (that's always an 'Off' for me), although in truth it is an effective way to iron out dynamics when you don't want to disturb others.

MultEQ XT32 proves to be pretty useful, thanks to a variety of filtered modes. Reference has a slight roll off, to remove the sibilance found on some movie soundtracks; L/R Bypass removes Audyssey processing from the front left/right channels (possibly a good option for music), while Flat adjusts calibration for playback in smaller rooms. Naturally, you can defeat the whole shebang if you want. In my listening room, MultEQ had a pronounced impact on the tonality of dialogue (better with than without).



It's certainly worth experimenting with the various options.

Dancing on the ceiling

As mentioned, the AVR-X7200WA can be optionally upgraded for Auro-3D (this costs €149). In truth this is actually the most awkward of all the 3D audio speaker configurations to retrofit, as it necessitates a two-tier stacked surround speaker layout, possibly augmented by a ceiling VoG (Voice of God). The height second layer basically sits above your existing 5.1 layout, creating a wall of sound, rather than the ceiling showering favoured by Atmos.

This Denon can run an Auro-3D configuration, without VoG speaker, without additional amplification, and still have power spare to drive two rear backs, which are not used in Auro-3D soundmixes.

While there is precious little Auro-3D software around, you can apply the processing to other sound formats. Other post-processing options include Multichannel Stereo, Super Stadium, Rock Arena, Jazz Club, Classic Concert, Matrix, Virtual and DTS Neo:X Music.

The AVR is rated at 150W-per-channel (into 8 Ohms) in multichannel mode. However, when run two-channel there's a huge spike in muscle – it's as if Dwayne Johnson has just usurped the volume control. Consequently,

'Enough power to drive a large home theatre and the dynamics to sweeten popcorn blockbusters'

take care when hoping from multichannel playback to stereo. The aural jolt to your nervous system is one thing; your speakers may not recover quite so quickly.

The Dolby Surround mode, which now upscales everything to take advantage of Atmos height processing, is actually rather entertaining. With *Queen Live at the Rainbow '74* (CD), it does a great job of recreating the confines of the Finsbury Park venue without the need for exaggerated delay, so common with traditional DSP. Roger Taylor's skins are locked centre-stage, while Brian May's fast-riffing guitar appears to bounce off the walls before chomping left and right.

Of course, those classic Dolby Atmos trailers also prove gorgeously immersive. The *Leaf* tease from Dolby's Atmos demo disc, surrounds you with jungle ambiance and unseen buzzing bugs, before the titular foliage cracks front right, in a single moment defining the entire soundscape.

Atmos Blu-rays beguile, too. In *Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part One*, when Katniss

heads to the transport ship in the opening reel, the sonic imaging within the hangar offered by this Denon is epic. There's a glorious soup of alarms which pan across your head, while hydraulics rise from the platform centre stage as the score gains tempo around. It's relish for the senses, even though nothing much is actually happening onscreen. When those turbines fire up, there's no little doubt in your mind that this is heavy machinery taking flight.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that the Dolby Atmos channel is just there to provide ambiance either. When Katniss stands witness to the devastation of the hospital grounds, it's the Atmos channel doing the emotional lifting, providing a conduit for the plaintive, mournful score.

Of course, with scant little Dolby Atmos software, this AVR will for the most part be used to upscale existing multichannel mixes. In *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, the opening deer hunt has the Atmos channels acting as acoustic fill-in. It's effective, but in and of itself is not entirely compelling.

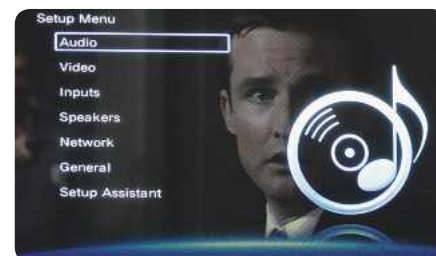
Not that you need 3D audio to justify buying the AVR-X7200WA. Its performance with regular multichannel is heroic enough. Fed undiluted DTS-HD Master Audio, this receiver sparkles. As the Tesseract (*Avengers Assemble*, Blu-ray) turns itself on, there's a luscious deep LFE power surge, and dynamic energy arcs across the back channel before Loki's arrival. Something portentous is about to occur, and this Denon hammers home the point with weight, poise and efficient placement.

Connected services are not a strong point, though. The Online Music button on the zapper connects you to internet radio and Flickr photo sharing. Apart from that, the cupboard is pretty bare. Still, the AVR does have one final trick – it's Spotify Connect compatible. Provided you have your smartphone on the same network as the X7200WA, you can cast tunes directly to the receiver. The TV UI displays cover art, while the AVR relays track details.

Dynamic superhero

With enough power to drive a large home theatre, and the dynamics to sweeten popcorn blockbusters, the AVR-X7200WA offers plenty of multichannel thrills. While an integrated 11-channel design would be advantageous, this Denon at least supports expansion through additional amplification. HDMI 2.0 with HDCP 2.2 means it's also well provided for when it comes to connectivity. But where the receiver currently steals a march on its competition is all-encompassing codec support. Auro-3D is a bit of a wild card, but the guarantee of DTS:X is a huge win. This is undoubtedly a smashing-sounding AVR, but the confidence-inducing architecture Denon has employed beneath the lid may yet prove to be its biggest claim to fame ■

ON THE MENU



→ The UI overlays your video source, and offers plenty of sub-menus to drill into

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD/ATMOS: Yes
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes (plus support for DTS:X via firmware)
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes. 7.1
MULTICHANNEL PRE-AMP OUTPUT: Yes. 11.2
POWER OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 9 x 150W (into 8 Ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes. 3 zones
AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 5 x digital audio (2 x optical; 2 x coaxial; 1 x Denon Link HD)
HDMI: 8 x inputs; 3 x outputs (v2.0 with HDCP 2.2)
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 3,840 x 2,160
COMPONENT VIDEO: 3 x inputs; 1 x output
DIMENSIONS: 434(w) x 437(d) x 195(h)mm
WEIGHT: 17.1 kg
ALSO FEATURING: Integrated Bluetooth and Wi-Fi 2.4GHz; twin subwoofer output; Apple OS and Android control apps; iOS wireless sharing; Audyssey MultEQ XT32 Pro Room EQ with LFC; audio file playback including FLAC and DSD; Ethernet; 2 x USB; Apple AirPlay; 12V trigger, AM/FM tuner; Spotify Connect; HDMI passthrough in standby; DTS:X support planned via firmware; Auro-3D optional firmware upgrade available

HCC VERDICT



Denon AVR-X7200WA

→ £2,500 approx → www.denon.co.uk
 → Tel: 02890 279830

HIGHS: Inclusive codec support; 4K HDMI with HDCP 2.2 support; dynamic multichannel delivery; versatile nine-channel design

LOWS: Limited online music service options; no THX processing; only the AVR-X7200WA model supports HDCP 2.2 out of the box

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



All aboard the Atmos adventure

The HT-S7705 marries a next-gen audio AV receiver with a 5.1.2 speaker package for less than the cost of a decent 50in flatscreen. **Mark Craven** welcomes Onkyo's entry-level thinking

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Dolby Atmos
AVR-plus-speaker
package

POSITION:
Onkyo's only
Atmos-ready
all-in-one

PEERS:
Entry-level
separates system

DOLBY ATMOS MAY be facing a battle with DTS:X for the next-gen audio space, but it has a few things in its favour. Not least the fact that it actually exists right now, both in software and hardware terms, the latter including compatible AV receivers and bespoke Atmos upfiring speakers.

Onkyo's HT-S7705 is a one-box solution that features both, enabling a 5.1.2 Atmos array suited to a small-to-mid size room. It ships in a hulking carton, best lifted by you and a pal, with the bulk mainly caused by the size of the speakers, rather than the amp. The two front/height enclosures stand a good 40cm high, while the centre channel is also quite sizeable compared to the competition. The two surround speakers are more of the size many will have been expecting.

Colour-coded speaker wire and a phono cable for the subwoofer mean no hookup headaches. Indeed, overall installation is fairly

painless, with an onscreen display guiding you through speaker setup (using the supplied mic), source connection, networking etc. The user interface is bland, and throws up a few awkward phrases where someone's Japanese-to-English dictionary has gone wonky, but overall it's not the worst I've seen on an AVR.

The AVR in question is here named the HT-R693, but it is essentially Onkyo's standalone TX-NR636, a 7.2-channel model (you can run a normal 'flat' speaker array if you want) with Dolby Atmos decoding prowess and some other key features.

Onkyo was first out of the block with HDCP 2.2-supporting AVRs and this forward thinking is found here. The amp offers two HDMI outputs, one of which (labelled 'MAIN') is *au fait* with the copy protection standard. If you plan to plumb in a 4K source, you'll need to select HDMI 3. In total, there are seven inputs (one mounted on the front). Additional



connectivity includes a secondary sub output, various legacy analogue hookups, USB, digital audio and Ethernet. There's also Wi-Fi and Bluetooth built in. Pairing a smart device with the latter is a quick option for music playback – networking your audio files via the Onkyo is more long-winded. But, personally, I don't need my amp to also function as a media player, and others won't either.

I was pleasantly surprised by the design and build of speakers. Each feels pretty solid, and the black wood veneer finish and Onkyo badge elevates them from looking cheap. The AVR unit, meanwhile, is a bit of a looker, with a clean fascia and smooth lines.

Flying machine

Performance-wise, the subwoofer impresses, up to a point. It's front-ported, with an 8in downfiring driver suspended off the floor by pointy feet. It's rated down to 27Hz, but with no roll-off figure quoted; whatever it's spec, it's certainly not afraid of making its presence felt. During the opening air battle in *Unbroken* (Blu-ray, Dolby Atmos) the engines of the squadron of bomber planes build from a distant rumble into an omnipotent throaty throb that threatened to anger the neighbours. I was cheered, if a little startled – serves me right for not checking the

level before hitting play. However, you get a sense that this woofer's output is lacking in nuance and outright slam. Bass events happen, but without any real panache. But this is a common trait of all budget woofers, in truth.

The Atmos mix of the wartime drama provided a good showcase of what the format, and Onkyo's enclosures, can do. One slight setup problem is the upfiring are built into the cabinets. Onkyo's standalone Dolby Atmos modules (or anyone else's, for that matter) are designed to be placed on top of your floorstanding speaker. Here, though, you need to establish the speaker so its front-facing drivers are at ear-level, which puts the heights reasonably close to your ceiling. If you're not wall-mounting them, this will involve careful placement, especially if you have a fairly low-slung TV cabinet. Alternatively, having run the auto calibration (which is Accu-EQ flavoured), you might feel the need to nudge the level of the height channels up a few dB.

Anyway, flipping between *Unbroken*'s core TrueHD mix and its Atmos bitstream revealed noticeable benefits. Simply put, there was a greater sense of wraparound immersion, with a wall of sound close enough to my face I could lick it. The TrueHD mix, by comparison, shrank backwards, and lost some of the elevated presentation. Conversely, running some music material through the Dolby Surround mode (which feeds audio to the Atmos channels) was less impressive, robbing Iron Maiden's *Hallowed Be Thy Name* of its tight, stereo impact. There are other post-processing modes (All Channel Stereo, for one) that work better with music.

Tonally, the overall sound of the Onkyo speakers is a little bass-heavy, with the tweeters working hard to outmanoeuvre a dominant lower mid-range. The

high-frequency effects that litter modern movie tracks (the clip of a belt buckle, the smashing of glass) aren't picked out with utmost panache. On the other hand, there's a full-bodied nature to the HT-S7705 that is hard not to enjoy. Movie soundtracks have scale and the system will easily go louder than you need it to. Speakers that cost thousands of pounds will wow you with subtleties and precision separation, but this bargain-priced array makes the most of its talents.

Overall, this package offers plenty. There are a few usability niggles and a preponderance of features that will go untouched (as with most AV receivers these days), but it's specced to last into the 4K era and has solid audio chops. Recommended ■



More buttons than you'll ever need...

ON THE MENU



→ The menu system is easy to get to grips with, if a little on the basic side when it comes to visual presentation. On installation, the Onkyo guides you through setup step-by-step. Handy for novices

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY ATMOS/TRUEHD: Yes

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes, 7.1

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 160W per channel (6 ohms, 1kHz, one channel driven)

MULTIROOM: Yes, Second zone

AV INPUTS: 3 x composite video; 3 x digital audio (1 x optical and 2 x coaxial)

HDMI: Yes, 7 x inputs; 2 x output (v2.0, HDCP 2.2)

VIDEO UPSCALING: To 4K

COMPONENT VIDEO: Yes, 1 x input; 1 x output

DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 173.5(h) x 329(d)mm

WEIGHT: 10.5kg

ALSO FEATURING: ARC HDMI output; 4K 60p passthrough; Bluetooth and Wi-Fi onboard; Ethernet; twin subwoofer outputs; headphone output; USB input; FM/AM tuner; Pure Audio mode; Dolby Surround; InstaPrevue; DLNA media playback; internet radio; Spotify; subwoofer with 8in downfiring driver; two-way centre channel speaker; 2 x single-driver surround speakers; 2 x front/height speakers

HCC VERDICT

Onkyo HT-S7705

→ £650 approx → www.onkyo.co.uk

→ Tel: 08712 001996

HIGHS: Robust, full-bodied sound; HDCP 2.2 and HDMI 2.0; Dolby Atmos support; tasty price; oodles of connectivity

LOWS: Bass lacks nuance; higher-frequencies a little shy; basic onscreen display; front speakers need careful placement

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Not quite over the rainbow

John Archer finds ViewSonic's latest budget projector let down somewhat by a colourful flaw



Manual zoom/focus controls are offered

THE VIEWSONIC PJD7822HDL talks a good talk. Despite costing just £540 it delivers a Full HD resolution from its single-chip DLP optical system; its light output is rated at a high 3,200 Lumens; it uses a proprietary SuperColour colour wheel system to produce an expanded colour range; it offers 3D playback via the DLP Link system; and its contrast ratio is rated at 15,000:1 – higher than you typically see with affordable DLP PJs.

And it looks the part too. Its small, table-friendly form sports a gloss white finish highlighted by a double-diamond design on its top edge containing a suite of control buttons. A window on the top, meanwhile, provides access to simple zoom and focus controls.

Connections are good. Two HDMI's will get the most use, but there's also an RS-232 port for system integration, S-Video and composite video inputs, a PC port and a powered USB. The latter means the PJ can handle wireless HDMI streamers like Google Chromecast.

Setup has its niggles, though. The rear panel doesn't carry a remote control receptor – an odd omission on a PJ with a short-throw lens. Zoom is capped at 1.3x and there's no vertical image shifting. I was alarmed, too, by the amount of light spilling from the projector's vents.

The PJD7822HDL gets back on track with its performance. Detail levels are high with BD moments like *Pacific Rim*'s Shatterdome sequences, and this detailing is delivered without obvious pixellation or jagged edges.

Despite the light leakage, meanwhile, the PJD7822HDL serves up a punchy picture. It's bright enough to produce engaging images even in fairly bright rooms, while, in a blacked-out space, contrast-rich images like the Colosseum sequences in *Gladiator* really pop. And ViewSonic's SuperColour tech helps the PJD7822HDL avoid the rather pallid, bleached look sometimes seen on very bright, affordable projectors. It's also a solid handler of motion, with minimal blur or judder to spoil the largescreen fun.

As often happens with bright projectors, black levels are pretty average. You don't notice this in ambient light, but turning off your lights for a serious film session reveals a distinctly grey tinge to dark scenes and a shortage of subtle detail.

A bigger problem, though, is the rainbow effect, where red, green and blue stripes flit in your peripheral vision or over very bright objects, especially when they appear against dark backdrops. Rainbowing is common with single-chip DLP systems, but it's more overt and strident on the PJD7822HDL than usual, presumably because of its high brightness and colour enrichment technology.

Some people see DLP rainbows more readily than others, of course, but I'd definitely suggest you audition this model before buying ■

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Via DLP Link

4K: No. 1,920 x 1,080

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; D-Sub PC port; RS-232; composite video input; S-Video input; powered USB; 3.5mm minijack input/output

BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 3,200 Lumens

CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 15,000:1

DIMENSIONS: 268(w) x 221(d) x 84.4(d)mm

WEIGHT: 2.1kg

FEATURES: DLP optics; SuperColour technology; multiple home entertainment picture presets; colour management system; gamma and colour temperature presets; 1.15-1.5:1 throw ratio; 1.3x zoom; 2W onboard speaker; vertical keystone correction; 8,000-hour lamp-life (Dynamic Eco mode)

AV INFO

PRODUCT: High-brightness Full HD projector at a budget price

POSITION: At the more affordable end of ViewSonic's range

PEERS: BenQ W1080ST+; BenQ W1070+; Optoma HD26

HCC VERDICT

ViewSonic PJD7822HDL

→ £540 approx → www.viewsoniceurope.com/uk

→ Tel: 01926 818242

HIGHS: Exceptionally bright, colourful pictures; affordable price; good sharpness

LOWS: Excessive rainbow effect; average black levels; no rear remote sensor

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Otone for your sins

TV speaker sins, that is. **Martin Pipe** finds out whether this affordable soundbase speaker from the UK audio specialist can save the day



TV MANUFACTURERS ARE thankfully paying more attention to sound, particularly in their high-end models. But what if you're happy with your existing telly in all respects bar audio? Here's the Otone SoundBase, a replacement TV speaker system with Bluetooth connectivity. It's a sleek rectangular box that sits atop your TV cabinet or stand. Your set, in turn, sits on the SoundBase. Screens up to 80kg can be accommodated, claims the manufacturer.

Behind the fixed front-panel grille of the SoundBase sit a pair of 2in drive units. They face the listener, but are oddly-positioned; the left speaker is ranged close to the left edge just as you'd expect, but the right one is nearer the middle. Surely a symmetrical layout would have been better?

You can't expect decent bass from 2in drivers, and so the SoundBase includes a bottom-mounted 3.5in woofer built into an integral reflex enclosure. Its port sits at the back of the enclosure alongside the analogue (phono) and optical digital inputs. The latter, I found, accept only PCM, so bear that in mind when connecting your source gear.

On the top panel, you'll find a set of basic LED-confirmed controls that allow the SoundBase to be operated without its tiny sliver of a remote. It's very easy to use, but the unit's build quality

and finish could be better – veneer 'bubbling' is an odd look.

Let Battle begin...

I fed its analogue input from a YouView set-top box, and its optical output from a Pioneer Deck loaded with a copy of *The*

The glam, bubbly finish won't suit all tastes

Hobbit: The Battle of The Five Armies. During the latter's first chapter, Smaug lays waste to the lake-town Escargoth, and the flaming wooden structures crackling and crashing into the water, the dragon whooshing around the sky and the general ensuing chaos are a good test for any home cinema system. While the Otone gives you some idea of the confusion and destruction, it's obviously only coming from right in front of you. The soundstage may be wider than that from a standard telly, but it's still rather compressed. You get little aural sense of the space in Smaug's lair, and there's no virtual surround function to widen proceedings either.

In terms of treble delivery, it fares quite well – clashing swords and shields during Chapter 28's full-scale showdown have nice attack. However, the bass department is limited and that has obvious implications for impact and punch during action sequences. Even Smaug's voice is robbed of its depth and menace.

A bass boost function provides a modicum of redress, but tends to 'thicken' the sound – and this is particularly noticeable with music. Other less bass-heavy voices – newscasters, Hobbits – are affected by a noticeable lower-midrange boxiness. However, this isn't serious enough to impair intelligibility.

Furthermore, there's none of the unpleasant cabinet rattling that some TV brands still insist in providing for free. The SoundBase can go fairly loud without descending into harshness or breakup.

Naturally, a system like this cannot compete with cinematic multichannel audio, but as an adjunct to a mediocre TV sound system for everyday use, it does the job, albeit with some caveats. The price tag will tempt, Bluetooth hookup is useful and it's a doddle to use ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 2in (treble/upper-mid); 1 x 3.5in (lower-mid/bass)
AMPLIFICATION: 2 x 15W + 30W (claimed)
CONNECTIONS: Stereo analogue audio phono input; optical digital audio input
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No
SEPARATE SUB: No
REMOTE CONTROL: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 653(w) x 67(h) x 317(d)mm
WEIGHT: 5kg
FEATURES: Bluetooth; bass boost; 3.5mm-phono and phono-phono cables supplied; can support TVs of up to 80kg

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Bluetooth-equipped stereo soundbase

POSITION: Below an HDMI model in Otone's lineup

PEERS: Sony HTXT100; Panasonic SC-HTE80

HCC VERDICT

Otone SoundBase

→ £130 approx → www.otoneaudio.co.uk
 → Tel: 0161 924 2269

HIGHS: Very easy to use; an audible improvement over many TVs; Bluetooth is handy
LOWS: Build quality could be better; no virtual surround or bitstream decoding; some midrange colouration and restricted imaging/depth

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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NAS with extra flair

Media mogul **Martin Pipe** plumbs in a slim-line NAS from QNAP and discovers it comes with some attractive extras – including HDMI connectivity!



IF YOU'VE BEEN put off buying a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device, the HS-251 from QNAP might change your mind. It's capable of the stuff a typical modern NAS can do – acting as a repository for all of your files (among them movies, TV programmes and music) that can be accessed by every networked gadget in your home – but it goes further. The appearance suggests this; the HS-251 looks more like AV equipment than something you'll tuck away out of sight.

And in a sense it is a piece of AV gear; this is a NAS you can connect to your TV. Around the back you'll find an HDMI port (actually, there are two but one hasn't yet been enabled). You can also use this display capability to monitor the various NAS functions, or browse the web with Google Chrome, on your TV. And thanks to a free package called Hybrid DeskStation, the HS-251 can run a version of XBMC/Kodi. It can thus play locally any of the multimedia goodies you store on its hard disk drives. Analogue AV connections are entirely absent.

No conventional handset is supplied, but a Qremote app (Android or iOS) that does the job is free. You can also plug a keyboard and/or mouse into the USB ports – the HS-251 (like any NAS) is a specialised computer after all. It

even has an operating system (QTS) that's similar to the DiskStation one you'll find in NAS products from arch-rival Synology, and has a huge variety of functions, among them surveillance (with networked or USB cameras), data backup, downloading (several BitTorrent

clients are available) and multi-platform file synchronisation. Naturally, there's a DLNA-compliant media server – for ease of streaming your video collection to Blu-ray players and Smart TVs – and configurable network file access to help you upload them to the HS-251 in the first place.

Transcoding, which sidesteps the thorny issue of certain networked players being unable to understand specific files, is supported too. You can add even more functions as free apps.

Another interesting NAS-related feature is the presence of not one but two Ethernet sockets. If your networking hardware supports it, you can combine their data rates using a tech called 'port trunking'. Great for streaming several Full HD videos at once.

The HS-251 has no cooling fans, thanks to the design's thermal management, and so can run quieter than most, if a little warm. Two 2.5in or 3.5in SATA hard drives can be accommodated. QNAP recommends SSDs (Solid-State Drives) or Western Digital Red HDDs. I didn't have either of these to hand, but the HS-251 worked reliably (and quietly) with a 3TB Seagate Barracuda.

As a NAS, the HS-251 performed flawlessly. Responsive to drive, it never failed to serve what was requested to a number of devices ranging from a A.C. Ryan media streamer to a Cambridge Audio Blu-ray player – among the content was JPEG images, FLAC audio files, ISO DVD images and TV transport streams. The onboard media player is also excellent.

I missed the feel of a conventional remote, but an optional one is available. The only downside is that transcoded video can suffer from obvious deterioration. Stick with media players able to handle your material 'natively', though, and you'll be fine. This is a NAS made with home cinemas in mind ■

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: None included, so you fit your own (SATA; 2.5in./3.5in; drives of up to 6TB currently)

AUDIO FORMAT SUPPORT: DTS/DD/HD multichannel (via passthrough); MP3; MP2; WAV (up to 192kHz/24-bit); FLAC (up to 192kHz/24-bit); OGG; AAC; WMA

VIDEO FORMAT SUPPORT: DVD VIDEO_TS; MPEG-1/2; MKV; MP4; DivX; XviD; WMV (plus still images)

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI (one not yet enabled); 2 x Ethernet; 2 x USB 2.0; 2 x USB 3.0

DIMENSIONS: 302(w) x 41.3(h) x 220(d)mm

WEIGHT: 1.6kg

FEATURES: 2 x drive bays; fanless design; QTS operating system; 1GB DDR3 RAM (2GB optional); RAID support; HDMI audio passthrough (for multichannel audio); MyQnapCloud; transcoding; AirPlay support; DLNA media server; HDStation (with XBMC/Kodi and Chrome browser); IR receiver; AppCenter (add new functionality); download centre (BitTorrent/eMule/FTP/HTTP)

HCC VERDICT

QNAP HS-251

→ £300 approx (1GB version) → www.qnap.com
→ Tel: 0203 6081 969

HIGHS: HDMI port surprisingly useful; quiet running; powerful and flexible software; additional functionality via app add-ons

LOWS: No eSATA ports or RAM upgradability; transcoding deterioration; can run warm; pricey

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
NAS device with
HDMI hookup

POSITION:
The top dog in
QNAP's slim-line
SilentNAS range

PEERS:
Synology
DiskStation 115;
WD My Cloud

The ultimate TV dongle

Roku? Nah. Chromecast? Pah! It's Amazon's Fire TV HDMI stick that is the AV source reinvented, says a besotted **Steve May**



The Stick is supplied with its own handset

SPECIFICATIONS

CONNECTIONS: HDMI v1.4; microUSB (power only)

AUDIO FORMAT SUPPORT: Dolby Digital Plus certified – stereo, 5.1 and 7.1 audio pass through

VIDEO FORMAT SUPPORT: H.263 and H.264 (depending on app)

DIMENSIONS: 84.9(h) x 25.0(w) x 11.5(d)mm

WEIGHT: 25.1g

FEATURES: Smartphone screen mirroring; wide range of streaming apps including Netflix, Amazon, BBC iPlayer, Spotify Connect, Tunein radio; X-Ray database search; Bluetooth; integrated dual-band Wi-Fi; handset/smart app control

IF YOU ONLY buy one new bit of AV kit this year, make it the Amazon Fire TV stick. It may be as cheap as chips, but this HDMI dongle represents a revolution in source components. Key OTT services offered by this Wi-Fi-enabled streaming stick include Amazon, Netflix and BBC iPlayer. But there's also Curzon Home Cinema, Spotify Connect, Demand 5, Vimeo, Mubi and loads more. However, arguably the best reason to buy is none of the above...

Naturally, you'll need an Amazon account to make the thing work in the first place. You don't actually need to subscribe to Prime, the postal/content service, as you can buy and rent *a la carte*, but subscribe (£79 per year) and things become a lot more compelling.

The specification is excellent for this class of product. Inside the Stick is a Broadcom Capri 28155 dual-core ARM A9 processor. This may lack the muscle of the quad-core silicon used in the more expensive Fire TV box, but there's no discernible difference in general use. The content selection is nigh-on identical too, with the exception of the gaming choice. The

Stick just doesn't have the processing power to handle more graphically intense software. But with a VideoCore4 GPU, *Crossy Road* looks great and plays well. There's also a generous 8GB of flash storage for app downloads (much more than its rivals), plus 1GB of core memory.

The video output is native 1080p, and there's support for multichannel sound up to 7.1 (content dependent). Bluetooth is provided and Wi-Fi is dual-band, with MIMO for the most robust of connections.

Image quality, provided you can hook up a fast connection, can be outstanding. Prime's time-travel drama *Outlander*, delivered via my fibre broadband, looks sensational. There's rich detail and depth in the image which is subjectively comparable to Blu-ray, while the show's Dolby Digital 5.1 soundmix is also delightfully effective.

The real clincher for any AV-holic, though, is Plex. This media server solution has been notoriously difficult to administer in the past, making it too much of a faff for all but the most dedicated propeller heads. But fronting a Plex server with the Amazon Fire TV Stick is an altogether simpler experience. For Plex to work you need to have a Plex server running on your network. I used a QNAP NAS, with the free Plex app downloaded and installed with just a few clicks. While it's not officially compatible with the Fire TV Stick, you can also sideload Kodi (formerly XBMC). Native file format support covers H.264, AAC, FLAC, MP3, PCM and Vorbis, but via Plex or Kodi this is widened. *Et voila*, you have a superb media player at your disposal.

Slickly superior

With its fluid interface, rich content selection and bullet-proof Plex client, there's really no good reason to pass up on Amazon's flaming HDMI stick. It may lack a full suite of catch-up, but it's slicker than the rival Roku dongle and makes Chromecast look like an irrelevance. Buy one for the spare HDMI socket in your life ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Wi-Fi HDMI streaming stick

POSITION: Baby brother to Amazon's dedicated Fire TV box

PEERS: Roku Streaming Stick; Google Chromecast; Now TV box

HCC VERDICT

Amazon Fire TV Stick

→ £35 approx → www.amazon.co.uk

HIGHS: Irresistible pricing; superb Plex app; buffer-free video streaming from Amazon Prime; slick user interface; physical remote

LOWS: Lacks a full suite of catch-up TV; side-mounted microUSB port is awkward; can't run the same games at the quad-core Fire TV box

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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KILLER PICTURE

Even low-budget B-movie BDs like *Crank* look good on this 4K TV



LONG-TERM TEST

Samsung UE65HU8200

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REVIEWER

Mark Craven

WHEN THE SAMSUNG UE65HU8200 launched in 2014 it had a retail price approaching £4,000. Now, it's available for around £2,500, as newer models begin to fill the shop floors. Below the very top tier of Samsung's screen stable, is it still worth a punt? Unequivocally, the answer is 'yes'.

What's good about it?

Firstly, having used the UE65HU8200 as my living room display for more than half a year, I can safely say that having a 4K panel, even at a time when 4K source material is astonishingly rare, is consistently rewarding. This is because Samsung's upscaling engine is supremely efficient. Full HD Blu-rays remapped to the 3,840 x 2,160 resolution are capable of jaw-dropping clarity, especially when there's not much motion in the frame to overwhelm the Quad Core-powered processing. Watching quality HD platters such as *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Lucy* has proved stunning, with refined

pixel detail, and broadcast HD looks naturally sharp, too. Furthermore, the 4K streams from Netflix, particularly *Daredevil*, exhibit enough extra detail to whet my appetite for disc-delivered 4K further down the line.

Overall image quality is excellent. In addition to its remarkable clarity, the UE65HU8200 showcases sultry black levels and realistic colours that still exhibit vibrancy and subtle blends. The result, at this size, is suitably cinematic.

It helps, of course, that I've arrived at a point where I am happy with the screen's settings. Samsung provides extensive picture adjustment tools, but in truth minimal tweaks are required to arrive at an enjoyable image. Ignore the Dynamic and Natural picture modes (the latter is a severe misnomer) in favour of Movie, which serves up natural colours and a respectable balance between black level and brightness, although I often tweak the latter depending on ambient light conditions.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Curved Ultra HD TV

POSITION:
Below the HU8500 curved models in Samsung's 2014 TV stable

PEERS:
Panasonic TX-65AX802;
Samsung UE65HU7500

You will need to set Picture Size to the pixel-mapped Screen Fit option, though. Equally importantly, Samsung's Movie mode applies motion interpolation as standard, which creates an unnatural fluidity and isn't immune from artefacting. I've found, however, that rather than turning it off, assigning the Clear setting brings benefits in terms of motion clarity without looking sickeningly fake. There are times when I have become aware that I'm viewing a processed image, but for the most part it feels natural. Impressive.

The Smart system, while not the new Tizen-powered interface of 2015, proves worthwhile, but for me, the number of features that get regular use is quite limited. There's

'Samsung's upscaling engine is supremely efficient. Full HD Blu-rays are capable of extreme clarity'

a plethora of catch-up TV apps, but I have Sky+HD for all broadcast needs, so only Netflix, Amazon and YouTube get a look in via the Samsung TV. The lean-back presentation of the latter is excellent, and searching for content becomes even easier via a Smart device on the same wireless network.

In fact, inter-operability between smartphone and Samsung TV is the highlight of the Smart TV experience. Screen Mirroring is a function that has real benefits, particularly when it comes to casting images from device to bigscreen. It's probably the one Smart feature that I couldn't live without.

For a premium-priced screen, the UE65HU8200 looks the business. The silver stand (with funky 'UHD' branding) is slender but solid, and the thin bezel and relatively svelte overall body means the TV hides its enormity well. You may think a 65in screen will dwarf your room, but you'll be surprised.

Onboard audio is decent. The speaker array tucked into this TV's Size Zero frame offers a balanced soundstage with reasonable amounts of low-end punch. For times when my AVR is dormant, it's adequate.

As with most kit, ease of use improves the longer you live the Samsung, although operating the set is hardly rocket-science from the get-go. It ships with two remotes – a smallish device with voice-controller/pointer talents and an old-fashioned zapper. I've found I'm content to use the latter. Menu navigation is quick,

the Smart Hub is a whizzy, graphical affair and the menu structures are sensible.

What's not so good about it?

I'm rather ambivalent about the UE65HU8200's curved form factor, having previously lived with a flat display. In terms of creating that extra sense of immersion that curved advocates talk about, I've found this minimal. Really, this is no more 'immersive' than a flat screen of the same proportion. That said, the curve doesn't impart any noticeable negative impact on image geometry, and visitors are always impressed by it...

Viewed off-axis, images suffer noticeably from washed-out contrast and colours. This isn't an issue from my main seating position, but in any room where there are chairs at a near 40-degree angle (perhaps you're filling your house with guests for movie night) the Samsung won't pack the impressive punch it should. Off-axis deterioration is an issue that affects many LED screens, however. As usual, just consider where the screen will be in relation to your seats.

As an edge-lit LED screen, I expected backlight flaws might prove noticeable. And, yes, Samsung's screen is sometimes afflicted by illumination clouding. It's most apparent when viewing 21:9 material, where the top and bottom black bars can struggle to match the lush black tones of a movie; it's at these edges where backlight visibility is highest. The brand has a mode, called Cinema Black, which negates this by switching off LEDs in these parts of the picture when watching 'Scope content, but this exists on the higher-end HU8500 screens, and not this step-down model. It would be a nice feature to have.

Standard-definition content, particularly low-bitrate TV channels, look pretty average, although this is more about the screen size than Samsung's upscaling.

Lastly, neither of the headline tricks of the secondary remote prove particularly smooth-running. Voice control is the sort of feature you'll try once and then ignore, and the

pointer functionality is less intuitive than simply using the handset buttons. These are Smart TV improvements with little current value.

Should I buy it?

While listed as 'out of stock' by Samsung, many retailers still carry the UE65HU8200. If you have an eye on High Dynamic Range (HDR) then this isn't the screen for you, but those looking for a 4K bargain should give it serious consideration. Performance is routinely stonking, and it's not hard to arrive at a first-rate image ■



The HU8200's curved design – more style statement than immersive talent...

ON THE MENU



→ As a 2014 model, the UE65HU8200 employs Samsung's previous user interface rather than the new Tizen iteration. However, it's still very enjoyable, with speed, clarity and ease-of-use high on the agenda. Picture adjustment menus are sensibly arranged. And it'll let you watch TV while browsing the 'net, should you want...

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active
4K: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160
TUNERS: 2 x Freeview HD; 2 x DVB-S2
CONNECTIONS: HDMI x 4 (v2.0); 3 x USB; component video; composite video; Ethernet; Scart; optical digital audio output; headphone; CI slot
SOUND: 60W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1451(w) x 840(h) x 111.5(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 26.4kg
FEATURES: 2 x 3D glasses supplied; integrated Wi-Fi; Screen Mirroring; USB/DLNA media playback; Smart Hub with catch-up TV, VOD apps, games, Recommendations system, social media; curved display; voice interaction; pointer remote; 1000 Clear Motion Rate (CMR); Micro Dimming; Local Dimming; Game mode; Football mode; supports Smart Evolution Kit; UHD Picture Engine upscaling; Quad Core processing; HDCP 2.2 support; CMS/gamma/white balance

HCC VERDICT

Samsung UE65HU8200

→ £2,500 approx → www.samsung.co.uk
→ Tel: 0330 726 7864

HIGHS: Detailed, sharp Full HD/4K performance; impressive contrast/brightness; plenty of user tweaks; smart design

LOWS: Slight backlight visibility; low-quality content ruthlessly exposed; not good for off-axis viewing; not HDR capable

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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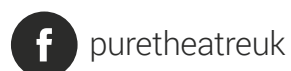
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DIGITAL COPY

As Hollywood's obsession with big-budget movies sees its creative focus narrowing, **Mark Craven** decides TV is the place to go for quality output. If only he had the time

HERE'S AN INTERESTING statistic: 2014 saw the first ever decline in the number of Blu-ray releases. According to figures crunched by the US-based The DVD & Blu-ray Disc Release Report, there were 2,035 new and back-catalogue platters released Stateside last year, compared to 2,098 in 2013. A small decline, yes, but until then the figure had consistently grown since the format launched in 2006 (when 135 titles arrived by the end of the year).

This can be taken, cautiously, as a sign that Blu-ray, at least in terms of studio support, is on the wane, and I doubt the trend will be reversed in 2015. As my colleague Anton writes over the page, we're already seeing less 3D titles being released, and studios are becoming increasingly keen to explore digital releases, or ignoring BD altogether – even if that means leaving collectors of *The Simpsons* with empty shelf space that they'd hoped to fill with new seasons (the show, as was announced in April, has been discontinued on physical media. D'oh!).

Clearly, the home entertainment market is evolving. And if I had to think of a reason why, I'd suggest turning your attention to TV.

The bad old days

Let's face it, TV used to be pretty average. In my formative years, I seem to remember there being nothing much of interest outside of episodic comedy (*Blackadder*, *Red Dwarf*), sketch shows (*A Bit of Fry & Laurie*, *Alas Smith and Jones*) and, er, *Lovejoy*. These televisual gems were dotted around a mindnumbing tapestry of game shows, soap operas and oddball sports programming. Yep, I grew up as a fan of Crown Green Bowls.

These days, however, there is an over-abundance of good-quality TV series. Most, but certainly not all, originate in the US, with runs spanning anything

from eight to 24 episodes. You'll find some parachuted into the UK's main free-to-air channels, and many more residing on Sky Atlantic, Amazon Instant Video, Netflix *et al.* From forerunners like *The Sopranos* and 24 to new shows like *True Detective* and *Vikings*, they are consistently riveting. And in recent years, UK productions have upped their game – witness the likes of *Broadchurch* and *Doctor Who* becoming world-wide hits.

For the goggle-eyed telly addict this is all good news, until you actually try to sit down and enjoy the explosion of new telly delights. Not only because you need multiple subscriptions, which is costly, but because you can't wait for an eventual disc release (both for fear of spoilers and the fear that it might never turn up), and because, really, you just don't have the time.

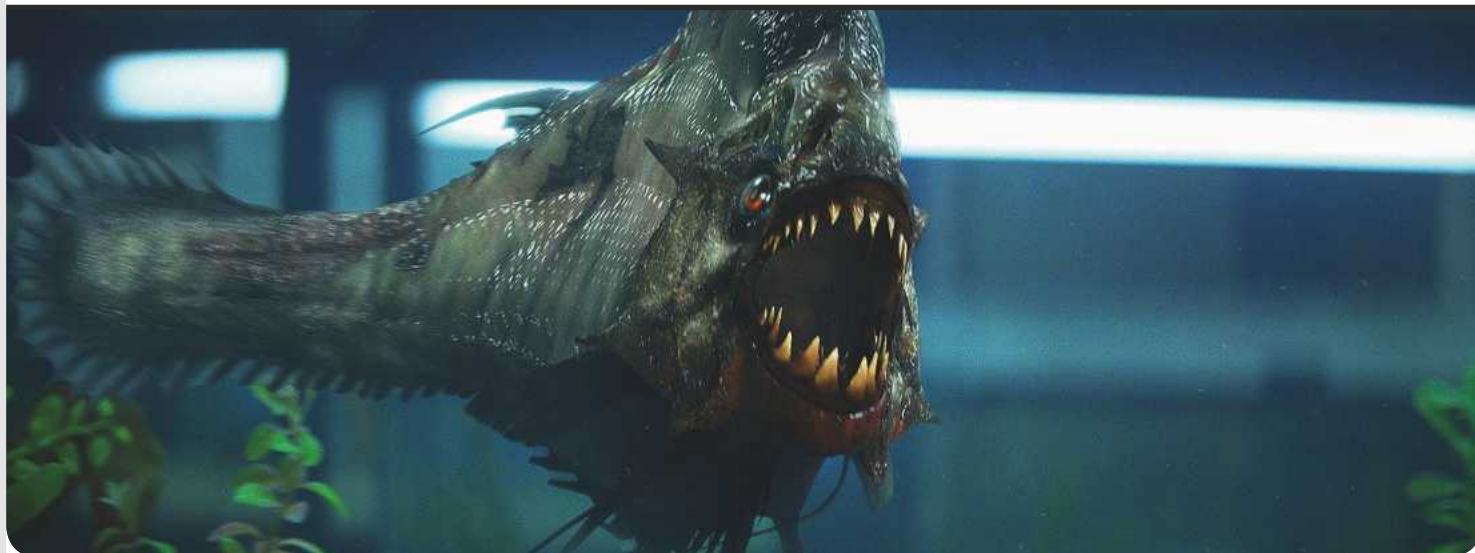
I'm being serious. **If I was to watch every TV show that people tell me I must absolutely watch, then I wouldn't have time to sleep.** I raced through all eight episodes of *True Detective* in a weekend, but am a few years behind the pace with *Sons of Anarchy* and have *Penny Dreadful* clogging up my Sky Planner.

Yet what I love about the new wave of TV shows is that they deal with stories, themes and genres that are often ignored by Hollywood. Modern cinema's currently very narrow focus (superheroes!) is nicely offset by these episodic dramas that are ploughing all manner of furrows. And, with high production values and surround sound mixes, many of them are fit to grace my home cinema without embarrassing themselves. So if Blu-ray is on the wane, at least I have something to soften the blow. All I need is an extra few hours in the day ■

Are you a TV drama junkie? What are your favourites? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Mark Craven will be spending most of this month watching *True Detective* Season 2 and trying to grow a moustache like Colin Farrell's





FILM FANATIC

3D home entertainment is as good as dead, claims **Anton van Beek**. But what part did outspoken filmmaker James Cameron play in its failure?

AS A HOME entertainment medium, 3D has been on life support for the past year or so, and it now looks like pretty much everybody is ready to pull the plug. That at least is the view of many mainstream commentators. And I have to say it's one that I agree with.

The first tangible evidence to support the demise of 3D came early last year when Disney opted not to release its animated blockbuster *Frozen* on 3D Blu-ray in the States. While punters elsewhere in the world could happily pop down to their nearest supermarket and pick up a *Frozen* Blu-ray that included both 2D and 3D presentations, the best you could hope for in the US was a Collector's Edition that included the regular Blu-ray alongside a DVD and a Digital HD copy of the film.

The same thing happened with the subsequent US Blu-ray releases of *Maleficent* and *Big Hero 6*. Indeed, during the entirety of 2014 Disney only released two 3D Blu-rays in the US and they were both Marvel Studios titles – *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

However, even though it might make the full range of stereoscopic titles available to UK consumers, **Disney has seemingly no interest in promoting 3D Blu-ray on these shores, having stopped making advance copies available several years ago**. The same is also true of other Hollywood majors like Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Bros and Paramount (although it should be noted that the latter of these has never made 3D Blu-rays available to reviewers).

For the most part, if we want to review a 3D Blu-ray in *HCC*, then we have to either wait for finished stock to become available from the studio about a week prior to release (presuming that the

label in question is actually amenable to sending one out for review) or wait until the disc hits shelves and pick up a copy ourselves.

Add to this Sky's recent announcement that its dedicated 3D channel is to become on-demand only and it's starting to look more and more like the industry has given up on domestic 3D.

Coming at ya!

Now, as far as I'm concerned, most of the problems that have dogged 3D for the past five years or so can be traced back to one film – James Cameron's *Avatar*. And I'm not just talking about the block-headed decision to hold back the film's 3D Blu-ray release for two whole years. Just as annoying was James Cameron's decision to mouth-off about 3D not simply being a gimmick, but a genuine storytelling tool. What a load of twaddle. 3D is absolutely a gimmick – and a fun one at that when used creatively. The last thing I want from a stereoscopic experience is a vague sense of depth to an image that makes me forget all about the fact that I'm watching a 3D movie. What's the point in having to wear silly spex for a couple of hours if the only benefit will be an increased sense of space within the confines of the screen?

What I want are films like *Piranha 3D* or *Kiss Me Kate*, films that play with the stereoscopic format, constantly breaking the confines of the screen. But instead we ended up with most filmmakers following Cameron's dictum of immersion over impact. Unsurprisingly, this hasn't proven particularly exciting for consumers, and now my dreams of one day owning 3D Blu-rays of *Revenge of the Creature* and *Jaws 3* seem to be crushed ■

What are your favourite 3D Blu-rays? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

In his ideal world, this picture of **Anton van Beek** would include a pointy spear thrusting out of the page and seeming to poke you in the eye



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PICTURE THIS

With more users than ever playing games on their hi-def TVs, calibrator **Vincent Teoh** outlines some simple adjustments to improve the gaming experience

THE VIDEO GAME industry is now bigger than Hollywood. More and more people are playing console/PC games on their TVs. Yet most users never bother to adjust the default out-of-the-box settings on their displays for watching movies, so doing so for playing games is probably an even more alien concept. Here are a few simple adjustments you can make within your display's user menu to obtain a more enjoyable gaming experience.

The first thing to do is to track down the Game mode on your display, and enable it whenever you're playing. Most modern TVs – especially 4K/Ultra HD models – feature a heavy amount of picture processing, ranging from upscaling and deinterlacing to noise reduction and motion interpolation, all of which add to input lag.

While not technically correct, **input lag has now caught on as the ubiquitous term to describe the delay from the moment a display receives a signal to the results showing on screen.** The higher the input lag, the greater the delay from executing something on your controller (for example, turning or firing a weapon) to the desired action actually happening on screen, causing games – particularly those requiring fast reflexes, like first-person shooters and racing sims – to feel sluggish.

What Game mode does is reduce input lag (hence boosting gaming responsiveness) by cutting down the amount of picture processing applied to the image. Although most of these processing elements won't be missed, especially if you're sending a progressive signal to the display (as is the case with the latest generations of consoles), Game mode inevitably kills off some useful ones too, such as local dimming and motion enhancement systems, leading to a deterioration in picture quality.

Nevertheless, image quality plays second fiddle to gaming responsiveness when it comes to video games... at least in my book. I enjoy deep blacks and sharp motion, but it's all a bit pointless if I end up at the bottom of the leaderboard. The prettiest picture possible when I'm playing competitively is one where my gamertag outranks everyone else's.

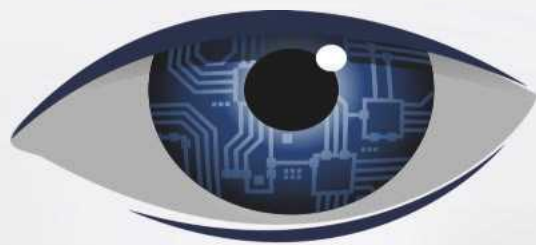
Even with Game mode engaged, not all TVs are created equal in terms of input lag. Since 2013, Sony TVs have generally delivered lower input lag than any other brand, though some manufacturers are now starting to sit up and take notice of this rarely-publicised parameter, with Samsung in particular making a big push to improve the gaming responsiveness on its UHD televisions. If you're having trouble locating the Game mode on these TVs, Sony's can be enabled by pressing the Options button on the remote, then switching Scene Select to Game; whereas Samsung's is inexplicably hidden within the System > General submenu.

Given the very purpose of Game mode, the number of picture-affecting controls are usually pared down, but there are still measures you can undertake to enhance picture quality. Usually over-boosted in Game mode, the Sharpness control should be dialled down to its neutral setting to suppress aliasing. And while most games haven't adopted the same colour standard used in the video industry, embracing a warmer colour temperature is always a good idea to inject greater realism. In this respect, Panasonic deserves special praise: since 2013 the company has designed Game mode to be applicable in any picture preset on Viera TVs, allowing for both accurate images and improved responsiveness simultaneously ■

Do you use your AV setup for video gaming? Let us know: Email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Vincent Teoh has worked as a professional video calibrator for seven years and an amateur gamer since he was old enough to keep hold of a joystick





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Feedback

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Multi-region BD cover up?

Hi, I suspect my query may be up Mark Craven's street.

I have been a devotee of your magazine for some years, have a home cinema system and run a cinema club at our church (on a 10ft-wide screen).

Obtaining Blu-rays and DVDs from around the world is quite important. One of my favourite distributors is Criterion from North America, with its superb specialist offerings. However, these discs are Region A-locked and I have to play them on my second Blu-ray player, a cheap and cheerful Toshiba which can be coded to any appropriate region for



Blu-rays (DVDs are automatically multi-region).

Noticing that all the Blu-ray player reviews are Region B only, this seems to be unduly restrictive. How do people get around this? Or is any mention of it kept under

wraps? Your comments would be most appreciated.

Martin Aldred, via email

Mark Craven replies: We review all Blu-ray players in the state they would be on shop shelves

– e.g. region-locked by their manufacturer. This is because our review models (almost always) come direct from the manufacturer, rather than any retailer that has added after-market multi-zone/region

★ STAR LETTER...

I'm a bit overwhelmed by new technology standards

In the last few issues of your magazine I've read a review of a 65in 'HDR-ready' TV [the Samsung UE65JS9500, *HCC* #246], and articles about Dolby Atmos, DTS:X, 4K video and whatever else. As an ordinary consumer I am finding all these new standards a bit overwhelming, and I count myself as fairly well educated when it comes to technology,

My point is that we ordinary consumers have grown tired of format wars over the years. We all remember Blu-ray and HD DVD, and I remember VHS and Betamax. These format wars seem to only help manufacturers make money and not make our lives any easier! How many people bought an HD DVD player only to then have to fork out more money a year later for a Blu-ray machine? And I've read letters in your magazine from people who have

purchased Dolby Atmos amplifiers who now discover they won't be able to play the new DTS format, so again find themselves out of pocket.

The whole situation is stupid. I look at new products like that Samsung TV without any real excitement as I can't help but wonder if another different technology will arrive shortly that will make it immediately out of date. You'd be mad to spend £6,000 on it.

We all want our home systems to offer the best possible performance in terms of sound and vision, but we cannot be expected to get excited by every new format that is released, as there have been too many times in the past that we have been treated badly.

Chris Marshall, via email

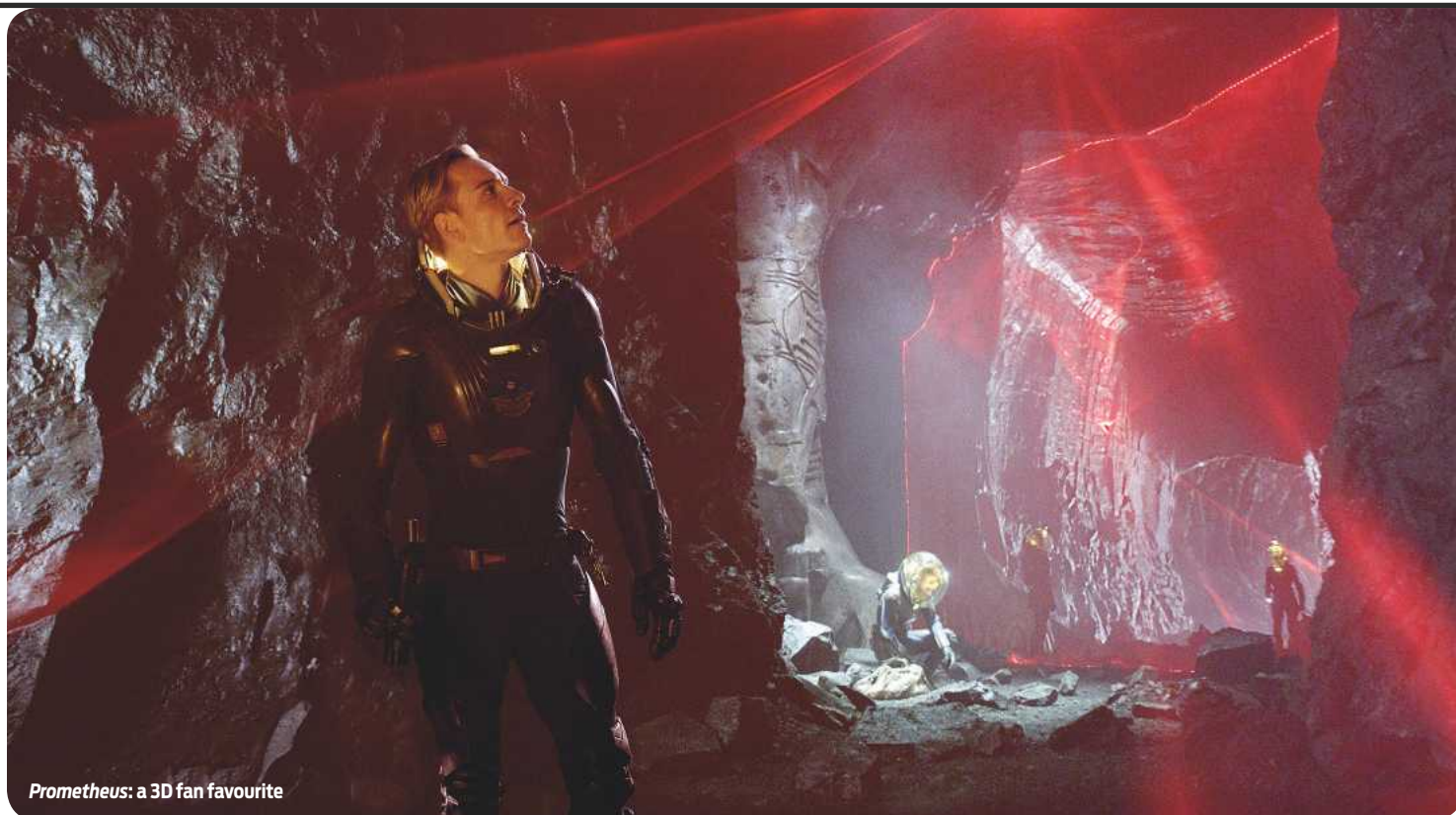
Mark Craven replies: Chris, you sound a bit angry. And, to be honest, I agree with you. As I mentioned in a previous issue, it currently seems as if we are in the middle of a major step-change in terms of home cinema (and wider home

entertainment) technology, with 4K, 3D audio and HDR all arriving thick and fast (give or take the odd delay), and companies like Netflix and Amazon shaking up the way we watch films and TV.

So the situation at the moment is complex, especially if you are in the position of trying to spec a new system. There are formats that we know are coming (DTS:X and Ultra HD Blu-ray) that haven't actually arrived yet, and other possibilities (4K satellite TV and 4K IPTV) that will surely surface.

But there is light at the end of the tech tunnel. With the Ultra HD Blu-ray specification finalised (it was announced in mid-May) we can now look forward to seeing new hardware (most





Prometheus: a 3D fan favourite

capability. For obvious reasons, Blu-ray player manufacturers don't sell multi-zone Blu-ray players as standard.

There are plenty of retailers out there offering multi-zone/region versions of BD players

from a number of brands, including high-end models like the Oppo BDP-105D (pictured, left) and more affordable disc spinners. Just doing an internet search for 'multi-region Blu-ray player' will direct the

international film fan to numerous sellers, or possible handset mods.

We're not keeping anything under wraps deliberately. We just assume that anyone after a multi-region deck can work out where to find one!

I understand that many who bought a 42in 3D TV may have felt disappointed by the format, but for those with projector systems it's a must-have. I will carry on buying 3D Blu-rays as long as they keep being released. Aaron, via email

likely at the IFA tech show in September) and software (hopefully around the Black Friday/Christmas period). Fingers crossed, as always. Then AV hedz will be able to get an idea on whether the format has legs, what the retail costs are likely to be, and whether a new display is necessary for them.

Secondly, as HDR is part of the new Blu-ray specification, again we should get an inkling of what content is being released (in addition to that being scheduled by the likes of Netflix and Amazon). This will let potential buyers weigh up the merits of expensive HDR-ready screens over their regular, and more affordable 4K counterparts.

Content, in my opinion, is king – no one wants to invest in new hardware if there's no actual reason to do so (although

4K upscaling and 3D audio post-processing certainly has its benefits). So, for people like yourself fearful of being 'treated badly', waiting to see what titles actually land in shops (and on streaming sites) is a sensible option.

That said, we still get excited by the likes of Samsung's flagship telly or Denon's AVR-X7200W, reviewed in this issue, because they hint at the potential of what we could look forward to down the line. And both are also stunning performers with existing content.

Star letter-writer Chris wins a copy of the Clint Eastwood-directed box office smash *American Sniper* on Blu-ray, courtesy of Warner Bros. Home Entertainment. *American Sniper* is available to buy now on DVD, Blu-ray, Limited Edition Blu-ray Steelbook and Digital HD download.

3D: big and beautiful

Terry Wells wrote in the last issue (HCC #247) that he felt that 3D was 'the most underrated format for years' and I must say I agree with him. I have never understood why 3D has been ignored by many movie fans, and the TV manufacturers and film studios as well. I have a 90in projector screen and an Epson 3D projector and I will always choose to watch the 3D version of a movie if it's released in that format. My favourite titles would have to include *Avatar*, *Tron: Legacy*, *Toy Story 3*, *How To Train Your Dragon 2*, *Prometheus* and *Gravity*. All of these are great films, but made all the more enjoyable with the immersion of the 3D presentation. Yes, there some 'bad' 3D discs out there, but I find the majority are worth buying.

Another point – I don't have a problem with wearing the 3D glasses. I find that after only a few seconds I have forgotten I have them on at all.

Anton van Beek replies: You'll see from my column (p80) that 3D is in our thoughts at the moment, particularly as Sky has decided to cease broadcasting its dedicated 3D channel. I like 3D too – I just wish some filmmakers would be more adventurous with it!

Mark Craven replies: You say you'll keep buying 3D discs as long as they are released. A word of caution – with the Ultra HD Blu-ray standard not incorporating 3D, you may find less and less titles to choose from if that format takes hold... >

CONTACT US...

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Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

I need a new beamer

Hello, I'm not, as Mark Craven states in his *Welcome* word of *HCC #247*, a film-fan that pushes his way to the front of the movie theatre (not anymore), but for my home cinema a projector and screen/blank wall is the way to go.

Because of having damaged my current Panasonic PJ with an exploded lamp I am in urgent need of a new model, and will go now for one with Full HD 3D. And as I'm projecting on a blank wall I want at least the same image size or even somewhat bigger. But here lies the problem in my search. The throw ratio (TR) of a projector is not always mentioned in your reviews. I was interested in the Optoma HD30 because of a good review but after finding out that it has a TR of 1.50-1.80 it's not anymore on my wishlist. So: is it possible to mention the throw ratio in every PJ review? I guess I'm not the only one who thinks that 'size matters', even when 'plot matters' is or isn't always the case.



BenQ's short(ish) throw ratio W1070+

I have a screen diagonal of 142in from a distance of 4.4m, so that is a TR of 1.40. I found the BenQ W1070+ has a TR of 1.15-1.50, so I can have my bigger image (for 2.40:1 aspect ratio movies and immersive 3D images). But in your review of the BenQ (*HCC #242*) John Archer says that this PJ is 'less successful

in 3D... here the image becomes bizarrely infused with red.' Is this the only negative thing for the 3D performance? And is it possible that this red is coming from the infrared transmitter that is somehow made visible because of the 3D glasses? Or is the 3D image infused with red even if you look at it without the glasses?

Has there been tests done to exclude the possibility of the infrared signal becoming visible because of the glasses?
Patrick, from Belgium

John Archer replies: The red tinge I discuss in my review of the W1070+ does indeed only appear during 3D viewing.

Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

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Fortitude: The Complete First Season

A shocking murder turns life in a remote Arctic town upside down in this gripping drama series.

Fortitude: The Complete First Season is available to buy

now on DVD and Blu-ray, and thanks to Warner Bros. Home Entertainment we've got three Blu-rays to give away.

Question:

Which type of bear is native to the Arctic?

Answer:

- A) Polar Bear B) Paddington Bear**
C) Grizzly Bear

Email your answer with '**Fortitude**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



It Follows

Prepare for a truly terrifying thrill ride when the modern horror classic *It Follows* makes its debut on DVD, Blu-ray, VOD and Digital Download on June 29.

Thanks to Icon Home Entertainment we've got five copies of the *It Follows* Blu-ray up for grabs.

Question:

What is the name of the up-and-coming genre actress who stars in *It Follows*?

Answer:

- A) Marilyn Monroe B) Maika Monroe**
C) Maika Yourmindup

Email your answer with '**It Follows**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Goodfellas

It's been 25 years since *Goodfellas* first hit cinemas – a fact that Warner Bros. Home Entertainment is celebrating with the release of a two-disc

Blu-ray featuring a brand-new restoration of the film, plus an exclusive featurette. And we've got five copies of the new *Goodfellas* Blu-ray to give away.

Question:

Who directed *Goodfellas*?

Answer:

- A) Martin Lawrence B) Martin Skrtel**
C) Martin Scorsese

Email your answer with '**Goodfellas**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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I wouldn't have given the projector anywhere near so positive a review if the same amount of red infusion also appeared during 2D footage too, I assure you!

The red tinge is visible if you look at 3D footage on the projector without putting BenQ's 3D glasses on, so the problem is nothing to do with the infra-red transmitter system. In fact, the glasses cancel out the majority of the redness when you put them on. However, they don't cancel out all of it, and it's certainly sufficient to be distracting at times, especially during dark scenes.

In all other ways the W1070+'s 3D pictures are actually good, but for me the red issue is a problem to make it recommendable as a 3D display.

Mark Craven replies: Yes, you're right – we should always be including throw ratios in our projector specs. So from now on we will.

Quad a waste of effort!

About 40 years ago when stereo was first broadcast, a new format was being promoted – a forerunner of today's surround sound called quadrophonic sound. Two systems emerged, JVC and Sansui. After a few trial broadcasts the BBC chose Sansui, and the equipment was purchased. At this point the sound crews decided to boycott the new kit unless they were given a pay rise, the BBC refused and the equipment was never used! It is probably still in the basement. The sad thing is, the trials sounded really good.

On another subject, I have a vast amount of SD DVDs I would like to store on a hard drive. Is there an inexpensive server available?

John Ellison, via email

Martin Pipe replies: If one discounts quadraphonic tape (Q4, Q8) there were actually three quad systems in general use, adopted for the music carrier of the day, the vinyl LP. There was Sansui's system (QS) and JVC's CD-4. But there was also the SQ system that



Projector screen brand Stewart Filmscreen is a fan of bias lighting

was pushed by Sony and CBS. This was probably the most commercially successful (or least commercially unsuccessful...) of the systems, in terms of record releases.

Of the three, the best-performing was undoubtedly the technically complex CD-4. This offered four discrete channels, thanks to clever tech based around an ultrasonic subcarrier. The other two were matrix formats, in which the four channels were converted into two during production for transmission, and then decoded at the playback end to recover the four channels. However, the primitive tech of the era meant separation between front and rear channels was limited. Comparing an original four-channel source with what went through the matrix encoding/decoding chain made such limitations painfully obvious.

The BBC adapted QS for broadcast use and called it 'Matrix-H'. Matrix-H was used by the corp for several years, although it didn't always go

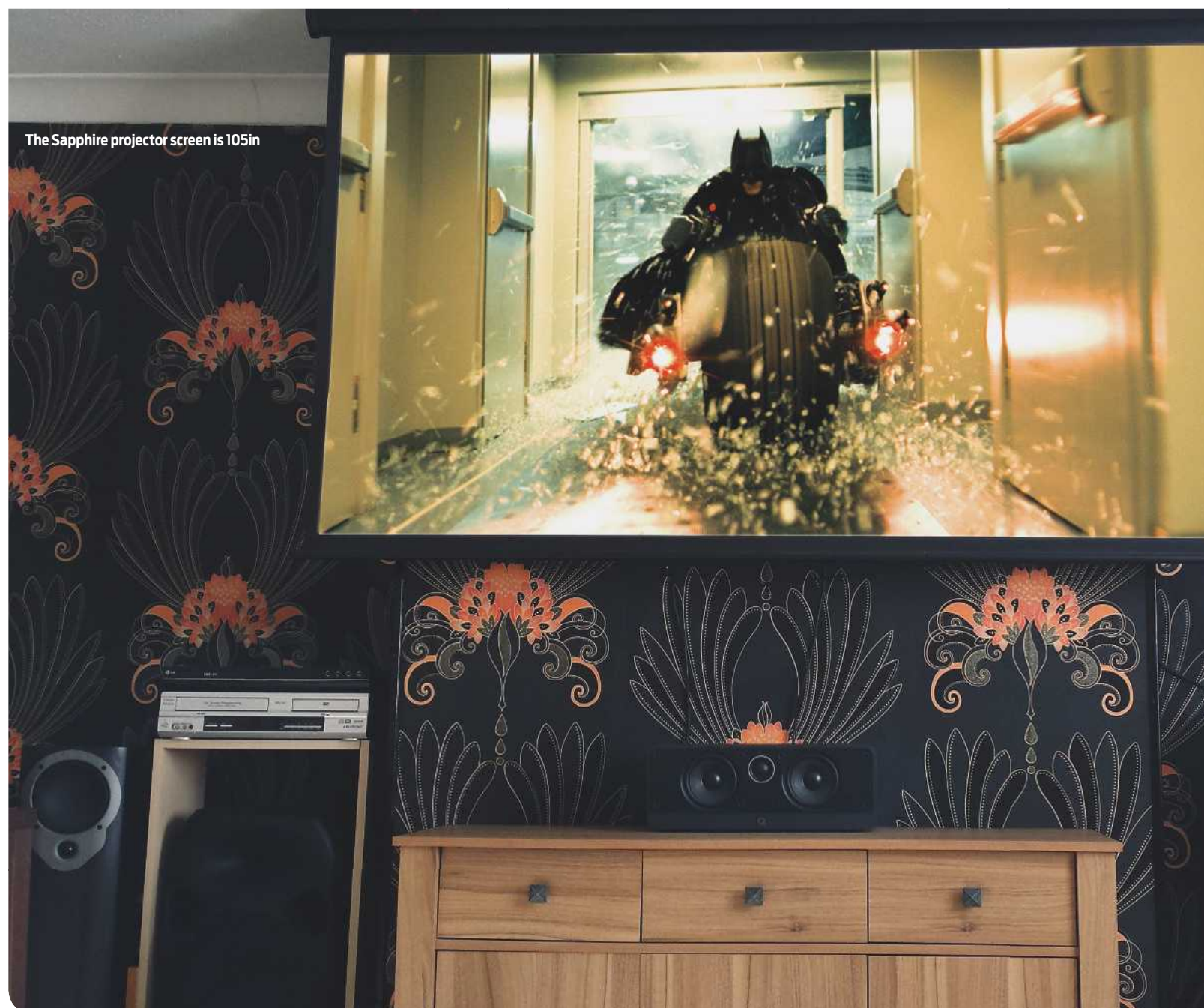
out of its way to tell the listening public which of its broadcasts (plays and concerts, mostly) were quad-encoded. The BBC also did a considerable amount of work with ambisonics, which attempted to create an all-enveloping 'spherical' soundfield. Sounds familiar? Remember that all of this dates back to the late-1970s analogue era!

As regards your second query, my advice is to buy an inexpensive NAS – Network Attached Storage – like the £120 Synology DS115 (reviewed in HCC #245) and populate it with the hard drives of your choice. Use ripping software to get DVDs onto your computer, and then transfer the files to the NAS. Most media players support ISO disc images, giving you the full DVD experience, including menus, extras, multiple soundtracks and no loss of AV quality. If your player is ISO-compatible, use your ripper's 'ISO' option to give you one big file – this is what you would transfer to the appropriate folder on your server.

I may be biased, but...

A recent customer of ours in the UK informed us of Vincent Teoh's article discussing the importance of video viewing environment conditions, particularly the technique of bias lighting [*Picture This*, HCC #247]. Thank you for mentioning our Ideal-Lume products and the CinemaQuest company. Ours is a small, boutique operation that specializes in imaging excellence. Our endurance in the consumer and pro markets over the last 16 years has been largely due to word of mouth recommendations from satisfied customers.

Television manufacturers don't devote enough effort in educating their customers about important video fundamentals. Your article illuminates the little considered reality that the viewer is as much a critical component in a video system as all the gear. Human visual perception must be understood when designing, equipping, installing, calibrating, and using a home cinema. *Alan Brown, President CinemaQuest, Inc* ■



Let's play the music... and watch a movie

HCC reader **Paul Jaffa** has turned his living room into a bigscreen film den that's a hit with friends. Here, he takes us on a guided tour...

Welcome to the AV-Holic hall of fame! Introduce yourself...

My name is Paul Jaffa. I'm 36 years old, and work as a freelance pianist/singer in North London.

How long have you been into home cinema? Do you remember the first setup you had?

I've probably been in to home cinema for about 15 years now. When I was living with my parents, I purchased a Toshiba 32in TV for my room, which weighed a metric ton. Two men were required to carry it up the stairs. It's amazing that I can walk out of Asda with a 50in LED TV tucked under my arm in today's world.

At the same time, I also bought a Pioneer DVD player (with progressive scan!) and an LG 5.1 surround system. And that's how I started.

So whereabouts in your house is the cinema room?

There's no garage or loft conversion here – the cinema is in my lounge.

What kit do you have in your setup?

I currently have an Epson EH-TW5910 projector (LCD, 3D), which I use with a 105in drop-down projector screen from Sapphire.

My AV receiver is a Denon model, the AVR-1912. Into this I run an Oppo BDP-103EU Blu-ray player. The Denon feeds my speaker system (which is a 7.1 configuration), which uses a Q Acoustics 2000C centre speaker, KEF HTS7001 on-wall speakers (for the surround channels), a KEF C4 subwoofer and two Mission M3i floorstanding speakers for the front left/right channels. I also have two Skytec SPS 122 PA speakers, for when I'm gigging or when I sometimes perform movie themes live in my lounge over the films when viewing!

For nostalgia I also have my old Yamaha AVX-700 amplifier and Sky HD box.

How did the speaker setup come about with those different models and makes?

My choice of speakers came through a mixture of reading your magazine and looking online through websites. The KEF speakers were purchased first, then the Q Acoustics and finally last year I decided to buy two floorstanding speakers. I suppose I don't really think of them as different makes and builds, I just go for what I believe will look and sound great for very good money. They all synchronise amazingly with each other.

Roughly how much have you spent on it?

I reckon I've spent close to £3,500 in all, and >



Epson's EH-TW5910 projector is ceiling-mounted



that includes the cost of the sofa as well as the hardware.

How do you rate the cinema room's performance? What do you love about it and what, if anything, do you think could be improved?

I've lived in my maisonette now for seven years and this is the best my cinema has ever looked and sounded. I had previous equipment which was very good, but now it's just awesome and in the right space. I actually look and admire my kit because it's years of hard work and dedication that's gone into making my cinema room what it is today.

Of course, home cinema technology rapidly develops and I know the system could still be improved by upgrading to the newer models. Right now, though, there is no need to upgrade for a while.

What do friends and family think of your cinema room?

They absolutely love it. I have friends around regularly for movie nights. They always phone me during the week to see if I'm up for a film at my place.

So what discs do you use to show off the system?

I have demo'd *Avatar 3D*, *Avengers Assemble*, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* and *Captain America: The First Avenger*. They're all great test discs.

And what are your personal favourite Blu-rays?

My personal favourite disc is *The Dark Knight*. It was the first groundbreaking HD disc for picture and sound, with the help of those IMAX sequences, and the film is still the best superhero movie ever made, in my opinion.

I also love *Casino Royale* and *Skyfall* for... everything, really. For the classics, my favourite restorations are *Ben-Hur*, *Jaws* and Arrow Video's *Blow Out*.

What's your favourite bit of kit?

The Oppo BDP-103EU Blu-ray player. I have never seen a disc player in my life this incredible. Every feature and nuance is simply outstanding in every way.

What's next on your equipment wish list?

I think it's a 4K projector. It's on my mind a lot.

So you're excited by 4K/Ultra HD?

Yes! I am very excited. The demos I have seen so far for 4K have been breathtaking. Ultra HD is the future!

And what about Dolby Atmos/DTS:X?

I'm interested, but at the moment it feels as though we are approaching yet another format war, which in some ways makes it very confusing for us consumers. I'm sure both formats both deliver but right now I'm still happy with DTS-HD Master Audio and Dolby TrueHD ■



Paul has a big disc and memorabilia collection

SHARE YOUR SYSTEM IN THE MAG!

IF YOU WANT TO BE THE NEXT 'AV-HOLIC' IN HCC, you'll need to send us some hi-res images of your cinema room. The better-quality image we get, the better your room will look. So follow these simple steps:

1. Go big. Set your camera to take images at the largest possible size, and at the highest resolution. Don't worry about cropping or resizing – we will make them print-ready.
2. Get in focus. Make sure your photos are as sharp and clear as possible. If you have one, use a tripod, or place your camera on a flat, steady surface and take pictures on a delay. The sharper they are, the bigger we can print them.
3. Let some light in. While we tend to watch movies in the dark, our

cinema systems look their best when they are lit. If you can shoot with natural daylight, do so. If your room doesn't get a lot of light (a garage conversion, for instance) then switch on whatever lights are fitted. Avoid using flash wherever possible.

4. Be thorough. Send photos of as much of the room as possible. Images of both the front and back of the room, the kit rack, speakers, seating, disc shelf, movie poster art... The more the merrier.

5. Don't be shy. We'd love a picture of yourself – unless you want to remain anonymous...

6. Show us more. Got pictures of your room before it was a cinema? Or snaps of work being done? We love to see these, too.

Email your selection of images to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic'. Provide us with some information about your setup and we'll then be back in touch.

...And blag an AudioQuest Pearl HDMI cable!

The kind people at cable king AudioQuest are giving away a two-metre Pearl HDMI cable to our AV-Holic each month. The Pearl, which retails for £34, uses long-grain copper conductors and a foamed polyethylene insulation for a robust construction. All AudioQuest HDMI cables up to 10 metres meet or exceed the 10.2Gbps maximum data rate for HDMI and are approved High Speed with Ethernet cables.





Photo courtesy of UK Home Cinema

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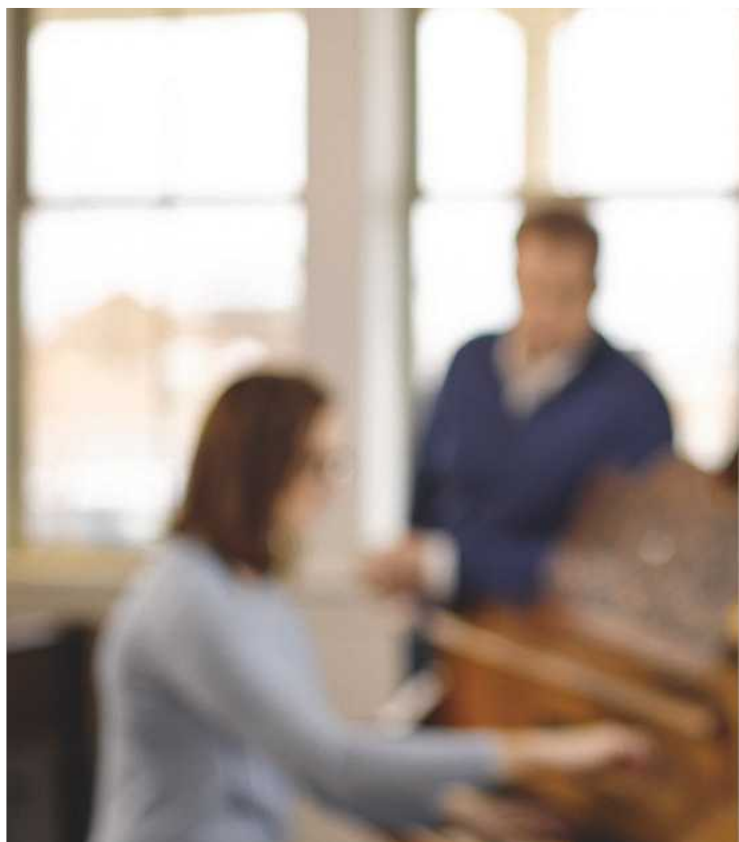


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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **FIFTY SHADES OF GREY** Will this hi-def bonk-buster get you hot under the collar? **EXODUS: GODS AND KINGS 3D** Holy Moses! Ridley Scott's Biblical epic is a real Blu-ray showcase **EX_MACHINA** There's nothing artificial about this sci-fi flick's intelligence **BLACKHAT** Michael Mann tackles cyber-crime **STRANGE DAYS** German disc is worth importing **AND MUCH MORE!**

Accidental hero

Birdman → Twentieth Century Fox → All-region BD

It's been showered with accolades elsewhere, but does the winner of this year's Best Picture Oscar also have what it takes to woo home cinema fans? Turn to p100 to find out if *Birdman* soars to new heights on Blu-ray...

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Every good night on the town ends
in a race to catch the last train...



Mann's hat is a pretty good fit

While not one of the director's best, this cyber-thriller is unlikely to leave fans feeling hacked off

→ BLACKHAT

Michael Mann's latest stars Chris (Thor) Hemsworth as Nicholas Hathaway, a former cyber-crook released from jail in order to aid a joint U.S.-Chinese investigation into a cyber terrorist who has used some of Hathaway's old code to bring down a nuclear reactor in Hong Kong. As the team cautiously track the mysterious reactor hacker through Hong Kong, Malaysia and Indonesia, they find themselves a target in his ongoing campaign of terror.

After the misfire of his 2009 period gangster film *Public Enemies*, director Michael Mann presumably expected he was on much safer ground with this contemporary thriller. Sadly, it wasn't to be, with the majority of critics slamming the film and audiences staying well away. All of which is very odd. While it may fall some way short of Mann's best work (think *Heat*), *Blackhat* remains an enjoyable thriller, elevated to something even grander through the filmmaker's boundless style.

Indeed, at the age of 72 Mann still finds himself at the forefront of digital cinema, embracing the technology in ways that no other mainstream filmmakers (not even those half his age) appear capable or willing to do. From shoot outs to somebody typing on a keyboard, he's able to give any piece of 'action' a sense of vitality and urgency that ratchets up the tension. And, of course, there's still nobody else with his eye for a cityscape.

What a shame then that *Blackhat* ends up falling short when it comes to plotting and character. In



HCC VERDICT

Blackhat

→ Universal Pictures

→ All-region BD → £25 approx

WE SAY: While it's no classic, Michael Mann's thriller deserves to do better on BD than it did in cinemas

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

these departments the film takes a few too many shortcuts, particularly when it comes to developing some of the supporting cast. If as much time had been spent polishing the script as was spent on its visuals, then *Blackhat* could have been something really great, rather than simply good.

Picture: The extremely stylish 2.40:1-framed Blu-ray encode feels like a natural evolution of the work Mann did on *Miami Vice* and *Public Enemies*.

Detailing is generally excellent, particularly in the big close-ups of faces that Mann favours; although shadow detail sometimes gets obscured by the rather flat blacks that are endemic to digital photography. Excess noise also raises its head in some darker scenes – although Mann uses it as another aesthetic tool (much like you would with a particularly grainy film stock), rather than a problem to be avoided.

Audio: *Blackhat*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix packs a heck of a punch when it comes to scenes like Chapter 10's harbour gun fight, and spends the rest of the time tirelessly engaging your setup with ambient effects that bring the locations to life.

If there's a 'problem', it's one people will be familiar with from the likes of *Miami Vice*, where Mann deliberately allows pieces of dialogue to be overwhelmed by sound effects, as they would be in the real world. It's a naturalistic approach that may leave some viewers flicking on the subtitles.

Extras: Just a trio of behind-the-scenes featurettes: *The Cyber Threat* (13 mins), *On Location Around the World* (10 mins) and *Creating Reality* (17 mins).

Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb

Twentieth Century Fox
All-region BD → £25 approx



This third instalment in the popular Ben Stiller franchise may be more of the same

(albeit with the action relocated to London), but it also brings bring the trilogy to a definitive and surprisingly poignant conclusion, and there's no denying that this Blu-ray release is also quite the AV showcase. The DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix never misses the chance to keep the surrounds engaged with positional effects, while the 1.85:1 Full HD encode is brimming with fine detailing and rich colours. Bonus features are both plentiful and enjoyable.



Foxcatcher

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£25 approx

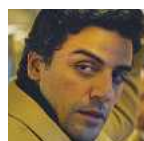


There may well be an interesting movie to be made about the events that led to the murder of former Olympic gold medal-winning wrestler Dave Schultz, but this definitely isn't it. While Steve Carell, Channing Tatum and Mark Ruffalo do the best with what they've been given, the film is so dramatically inert and unwilling to really engage with the psychology of its characters that it comes across as rather hollow. This feeling is enhanced by the Blu-ray's deliberately desaturated AVC 1.85:1 encode and minimalist DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack. A promo featurette and three deleted scenes are included.



A Most Violent Year

Icon Home Entertainment
Region B BD → £20 approx



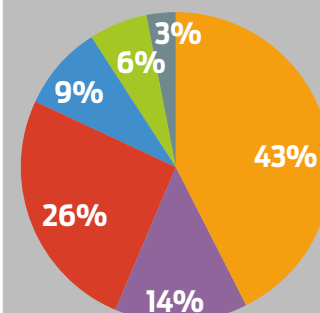
The shadow of Sidney Lumet looms large over this crime drama about an ambitious heating oil entrepreneur (Oscar Isaacs) who must deal with corruption charges from those on one side of the law, and attacks on his workers from those on the other. Post-production colour grading (mainly sickly and chilly blues) serves to give the Blu-ray's 2.35:1 Full HD encode a distinctive aesthetic, but also results in a mix of crushed and washed-out blacks that lack shadow detail. Unsurprisingly, the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is low-key. Extras include a commentary and an abundance of *Making of...* featurettes.



WE ASKED...

Which do you think is Ridley Scott's best blockbuster?

■ Alien ■ Blade Runner
■ Gladiator ■ Black Hawk Down
■ Prometheus ■ Exodus



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Bondage flick needs more gags

There's nothing funny about being kinky is this painfully serious bonk-buster...

→ FIFTY SHADES OF GREY: UNSEEN EDITION

This saucy blockbuster tells the tale of sexually naive college student Anastasia Steele (Dakota Johnson), who begins a relationship with hunky businessman Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan), only to learn that he is even more dominant in the bedroom (or, more accurately, his 'red room of pain') than he is in the corporate boardroom.

There's no getting around it, *Fifty Shades of Grey* isn't a memorable film. At least if it had been laughably bad it would have provided its own type of entertainment. But this highly publicised flick commits the sin of merely being extraordinarily dull.

Firstly, there's very little chemistry between the two leads, which would have been useful in helping to overcome the terrible, wooden dialogue that fills the downtime between the naughty bits. Heck, even the supposedly edgy and transgressive rumpy-pumpy will fail to startle most viewers – there's certainly nothing as erotic or iconic as, for example, the fridge scene from *9½ Weeks*.

You only have to look at the likes of *Secretary* and *The Duke of Burgundy* (see p98) to see how material such as this can be treated in a way that manages to keep viewers engaged with intelligent storytelling, a sense of humour and fully-rounded characters. As it stands, the knowledge that there are two *Fifty Shades...* sequels on the way is far more sadistic than any of Christian Grey's bedroom antics.

Picture: *Fifty Shades...* certainly looks pretty impressive when rendered at 1080p. The Blu-ray's AVC 2.40:1 encode does great work with the



film's warm colour palette, particularly when it comes to the rich hues that fill the screen during Chapter 13's contract signing or any of the visits to Christian's 'playroom'. Detailing is also extremely refined, with tiny pores and hairs clearly visible on all of the naked flesh.

Audio: The DTS-HD MA 5.1 track on Universal's release is a rather uneventful affair. Dialogue and music sound every bit as authentic as you'd expect from a modern film, and there's good separation across the front stereo spread. But outside of subtle atmospheric effects and surrounding you with the score, there's really very little attempt made at engaging the rears.

Extras: The disc includes two cuts of the film – *Theatrical* (125 mins) and *Unseen* (128 mins). More traditional extras take the form of a multitude of promo featurettes; a 20-min *Making of...*; and an interactive tour of Christian's apartment.



HCC VERDICT

Fifty Shades of Grey: Unseen Edition

→ Universal Pictures

→ All-region BD → £25 approx

WE SAY: A virile hi-def outing for an impotent example of cinematic erotica

Movie ★★☆☆☆

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★☆☆☆

You'd think crew members would know to stay out of Christian Bale's eyeline by now



Keeping faith in home cinema

Ridley Scott's Biblical blockbuster shows that Blu-ray remains the only choice for true film fans



→ EXODUS: GODS AND KINGS – 3-DISC COLLECTOR'S EDITION

Following the downright bizarre misfire of 2013's crime drama *The Counsellor*, Ridley Scott went back to doing what he does best – epic blockbuster spectacle – with this lavish re-telling of the story of Moses. Every bit of the film's \$140million budget is there on the screen for all to see, although some of the storytelling decisions that have been made serve to make *Exodus...* a bit of a mess when you get past all of the epic grandeur. It's no *Gladiator*, basically.

Christian Bale (Moses) and Joel Edgerton (Ramses II) are both talented actors, yet the script does them few favours. The decision to have God tell Moses to take a backseat while He gets on with a series of plagues means that the main character is absent during some of the most iconic parts of the story. Meanwhile, despite early hints of being an arresting and conflicted character, Ramses II ends up becoming nothing more than a 'boo-hiss' pantomime villain.

Thankfully, the one thing that you can't call *Exodus...* is boring. From battles with a Hittite army to the depiction of the plagues themselves, Scott regularly conjures up the sort of cinematic magic that he's built a career on,

and which has the power to keep you glued to your seat. If you're willing to treat *Exodus...* as a brainless blockbuster, you'll be on pretty safe ground.

Picture: Let's not beat around the burning bush: *Exodus: Gods and Kings* looks fantastic on Blu-ray.

The 2D AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode is a true work of art, impressing from the get-go with its visual acuity. The imagery is cleanly delineated throughout, the sharpness and clarity helping highlight the meticulous detailing visible in every shot. Colour presentation is also flawless, with the encode having no difficulty reproducing the films' myriad vivid hues, including the gold finery of the costumes. Contrasting these are rock solid blacks that retain plenty of shadow detail.

Curiously, the stereoscopic MVC 2.40:1 encode (which gets a disc all to itself in this triple-platter Collector's Edition) isn't quite as immersive as we expected. Despite reasonable depth of field, volumetric effects feel underplayed and there's little that really wows. While there's no denying the technical excellence of the 3D BD encode, it doesn't really add much to watching *Exodus...*, which is a shame given the affinity Scott showed for the 3D format with *Prometheus*.

Audio: This DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 mix is more than a match for the film's mind-boggling visuals. The entire soundfield is peppered with frequent surround effects,



The menus may look rather drab, but they provide access to a wealth of extras



The casting of white actors in all the lead roles, including Moses and Ramses II (right), caused plenty of controversy

DEMO SCREEN...

Exodus: Gods and Kings 3D

Time code: 131.25 – 133.38



Wave goodbye: While the exiled Hebrews and pursuing Egyptian army flee an oncoming wall of water, Moses and Ramses II face-off on the dry bed of what was the Red Sea.



Life's a beach: The intricate detailing in the Blu-ray's 2.40:1 Full HD image and power of the lossless 7.1 audio ensure that the shots of those fleeing the wave have a suitably epic scale.



Pouring down: The accomplished stereoscopic encoding means there's a real sense of volume and depth to the wave as it comes crashing down over the heads of Moses and Ramses II.



Water way to go: The destruction ends with a haunting 3D image looking up through the water, past the bodies of drowned Egyptian soldiers and their sinking chariots.

while dialogue and Alberto Iglesias' music are both presented flawlessly.

Naturally, the mix is at its very best when it comes to the set-piece action scenes. The attack on the Hittite camp (Chapter 3), Moses' guerilla attacks (Chapter 21) and the chase across the Red Sea (Chapter 36 – see Demo Screen... boxout above) all provide the sort of powerful, dynamic and immersive sonics that will delight audiophiles.

In short, this has demo disc written all over it, although we do wish Twentieth Century Fox had bothered to implement the Dolby Atmos soundtrack that *Exodus...* had for its theatrical run.

Extras: The 2D version of the film is accompanied by a pop-up trivia track (*The History of Exodus*), nine deleted and extended scenes, plus a fascinating commentary by Ridley Scott and writer Jeffrey Caine that is brimming with facts and insight.

Everything else is housed on a bonus hi-def platter, the centrepiece of which is the 153-minute, seven-part *Keepers of the Covenant: The Making of Exodus: Gods and Kings* documentary. There are also 14 additional Enhancement Pods (total running time, 48 minutes) that can be linked to while watching the doc or be viewed separately.



An additional featurette, *The Lawgiver's Legacy: Moses Throughout History* (23 minutes), explores the historical basis for the story.

Finally, there's *The Gods and Kings Archive*. Split into three sections (*Pre-Production*, *Production* and *Post-Production and Release*) this is a treasure trove of production art, photographs, pre-vis comparisons, storyboards, trailers, TV spots, posters and even a look at a typical day on the set, shot by the director using Google Glass technology.

Almería and Pechina in Andalusia, Spain, doubled for Egypt in the film



'Looks like it's gonna be a white Christmas after all...'



HCC VERDICT

Exodus: Gods and Kings – 3-Disc Collector's Edition

→ Twentieth Century Fox
→ All-region BD & Region A/B BD
→ £28 approx

WE SAY: A spectacular Blu-ray package for a middling Biblical bash

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

Mortal Kombat X

Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment → Xbox One/Xbox 360/PS4/PS3/PC
→ £40 approx



These days you can't move without falling over yet another new game promising an 'involving interactive narrative experience' that pushes the medium to its limits. And while there's nothing wrong with that, sometimes you just want to shout 'Get over here'

while ripping somebody's spine out.

Enter *Mortal Kombat X*, the tenth game in the notorious beat 'em up series and the second to be developed by NetherRealm Studios. As with that earlier title (and the superb *Injustice: Gods Among Us*), *Mortal Kombat X* sees the developer further refining the mechanics of the genre and cooking up a host of entertaining modes that will keep players coming back for more. The result is by far the most enjoyable game in the series to date – and also the most gory. Make no mistake, *Mortal Kombat X* goes out of its way to fully justify its 'PEGI 18' rating.

The icing on this particularly violent cake is the presentation, with the lavishly detailed character models and impressively drawn backdrops giving the game a truly next-gen feel. Indeed, our only complaint is the way that the most interesting 'Kombatants' (including special guests Jason Voorhees and the Predator) are only available as additional DLC purchases.



Final Fantasy Type-0 HD

Square Enix → Xbox One/PS4 → £35 approx



Those gamers that have followed and played some, if not all, of the long-running Japanese action-RPG *Final Fantasy* series from Square Enix, will doubtless have come across *Final Fantasy Type-0* before now. The original was a Japanese-only release for Sony's nascent PSP games portable back in 2011.



Interestingly this HD remaster lands not on the PSP's successor, the Vita, but the PS4 and Xbox One. Don't get too excited, though. While the graphics have been spruced up, it still looks like a warmed-up PS3 title. Animation is clunky, characters spin on their heels and glide into walls, while cut-scenes play out through a stylised fog of grain.

Final Fantasy Type-0 HD shares a backstory with *Final Fantasy XIII*. There's a *faux* historical backdrop, wrapped up in language so flowery only Alan Titchmarsh will be able to make any sense of it. Suffice to say the good guys look like New Romantics, with hair gelled into Himalayan spikes and the action sequences owe more to button-mashing fighters than a traditional RPG.

Bundled with *...Type-0 HD* is *FFXV Episode Duscae*, a playable preview of the fifteenth game in the series, and a sequel of sorts from director Hajime Tabata. Long in development, it seems a far more convincing next-gen platform release. After the density of *...Type-0 HD*, it's quite the palate cleanser.



The Duke of Burgundy

Artificial Eye → Region B BD
£20 Approx



This month's second helping of kinky sexuality comes from *Barbarian Sound Studio* director Peter Strickland and is a far more satisfying and affecting piece of cinema than its glossy

Hollywood competitor. A portrait of a troubled S&M relationship between two women, Strickland's film is rich with pathos and humour – not to mention style (taking its visual cues mainly from '70s Eurotrash horror). Meanwhile, the BD features a pristine encode and will keep you tied up for ages with its extras.



Charlie Chaplin: The Mutual Comedies

BFI → Region B BD
£30 Approx



During 1916 and 1917, Charlie Chaplin made 12 two-reel shorts for the Mutual Film Corporation. Including such classics as *The Immigrant*, *Easy Street*, *The Vagabond* and *The Pawnshop*,

they remain some of the most inventive films in Chaplin's entire body of work. This outstanding two-disc set features exquisite restorations of all 12 films – each accompanied by a variety of audio options (led by music for each by acclaimed silent film composer Carl Davis) – alongside informative commentaries, plus two archival newsreels and an interview with Davis.



Cobain: Montage of Heck

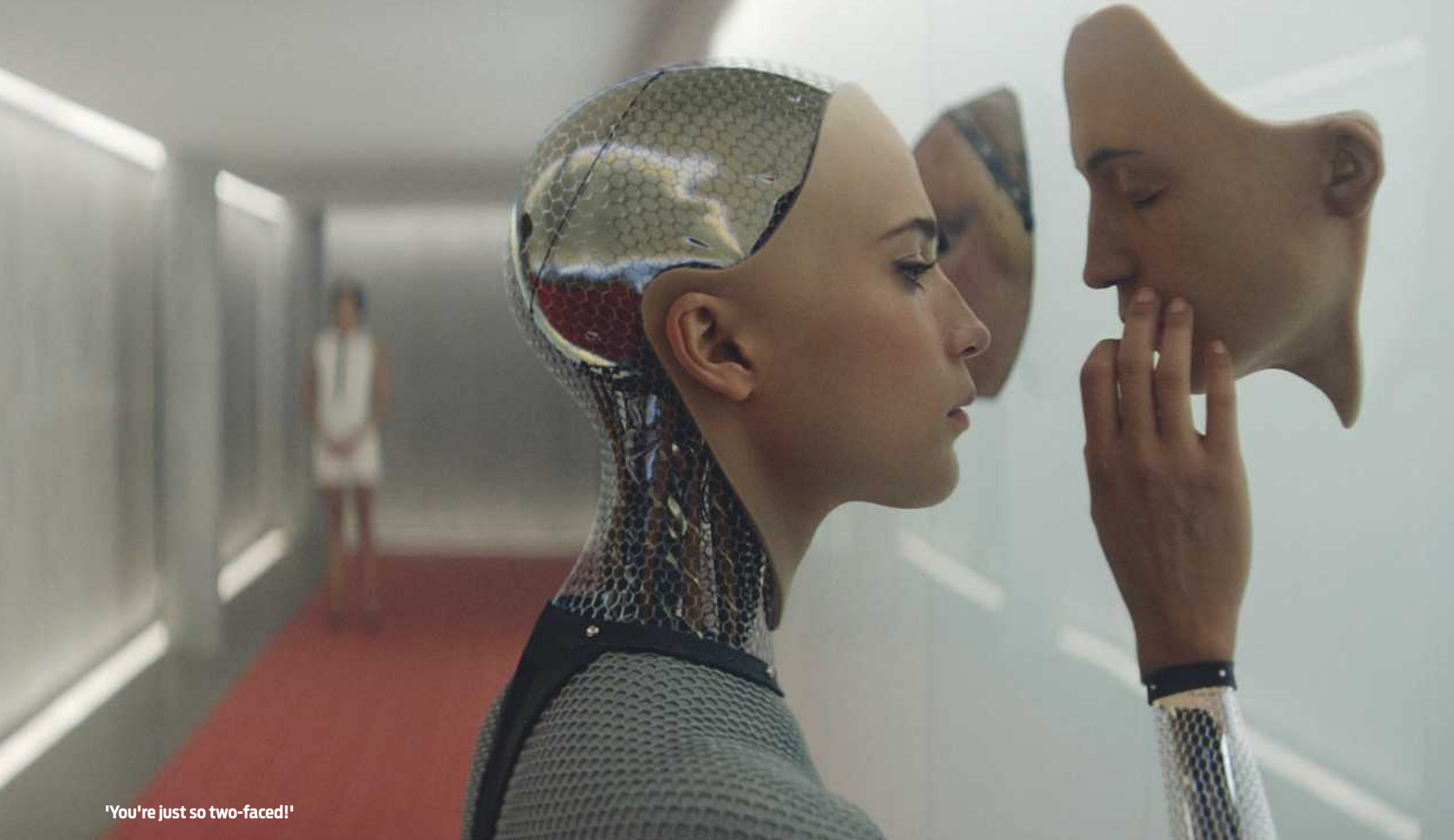
Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



Using a mix of interviews, animation and previously unseen home movie footage, this astonishingly raw and powerful rock documentary is a must for fans of Nirvana

and its fiercely creative frontman Kurt Cobain. While it should hardly come as a surprise that the AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode is limited by the nature of the original footage, it still does a good job of handling some potentially problematic source material. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix also holds up better than expected.





'You're just so two-faced!'

'I think, therefore I am. Maybe...'

This sweet-sounding, smart-thinking British science-fiction thriller impresses on Blu-ray

→ **EX_MACHINA**

This sci-fi/thriller and directorial debut from Alex Garland (who previously penned the scripts for *28 Days Later*, *Sunshine* and *Dredd*), focuses on slowly-built tension rather than wall-to-wall action, but is all the better for it. Imbued with a pervasive sense of things-not-being-quite-what-they-seem, *Ex_Machina* compels you to focus your attention until it reaches its unnerving conclusion.

Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), a coder working for the world's largest search engine, wins a staff lottery and gets to spend a week with the reclusive company founder Nathan (Oscar Isaac) in his mountain retreat. Upon arrival, Caleb discovers he will be conducting a Turing Test on Nathan's latest invention, an advanced AI machine called Ava (Alicia Vikander), with a female face and mostly robotic body. Nathan wants Caleb to discover if Ava is capable of independent thought, but does he have an ulterior motive? Is Ava truly self-aware, or just programmed to act that way? Is Caleb smarter than he looks? So many questions...

Featuring only three main speaking roles and essentially limited to one location, *Ex_Machina* can feel like a stageplay brought to the silver screen. Yet this minimalist nature is also its strength, particularly when the trio of characters are so well crafted (particularly Nathan, a cross between General Kurtz and Mark Zuckerberg) and the location is beautifully designed and photographed. Garland proves a



success behind the camera, too; framing the protagonists' interactions with a barely-moving camera that heightens the tension.

Picture: This 2.40:1 AVC encode deposits *Ex_Machina*'s digital photography onto your screen without fuss. It's not the sharpest picture we've seen (and there are times

when then image has stylistically soft areas) but clarity is never in question and colours and skin tones appear authentic. There's a somewhat dark feel to the cinematography, favouring deep blacks over punchy brightness, but it never results in overt crush.

Audio: The sound design here is a departure from the norm, with Garland happy to let key scenes play out bereft of dialogue, and letting the superb score by Ben Salisbury and Geoff Barrow envelop you in the visuals. Thankfully, it sounds resplendent in this DTS-HD 5.1 mix, growing to a room-filling crescendo in Chapter 18.

Aside from the score, the mix delivers dialogue with utter intelligibility and utilises the soundfield to create a believable ambience, be it the naturalistic sound of an on-rushing waterfall or the claustrophobic confines of Ava's quarters.

Extras: *Ex_Machina* is the sort of title crying out for some decent, in-depth extra material. Garland is obviously a filmmaker with ideas and many would appreciate some insight into the movie's themes, VFX and soundtrack production. Unfortunately, all that is offered here are five brief featurettes that ostensibly cover the story, casting, location, etc, but barely scratch the surface. Pah.



The VFX work was handled by UK firm Double Negative



HCC VERDICT

Ex_Machina

→ Universal Pictures

→ Region B BD → £25 approx

WE SAY: Riveting, intelligent sci-fi-tinged thriller on a disc with solid AV credentials

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

'You should know that it's considered lucky if I do it on your shoulder!'

DISC
OF THE
MONTH

A long Dark Knight of the soul

Award-winning film flies high on Blu-ray with its spectacular picture and sound quality



→ BIRDMAN

Best known for playing the superhero Birdman in a series of Hollywood blockbusters a decade earlier, washed-up actor Riggan Thomson (Michael Keaton) is out to reinvent himself on Broadway. To this end, he has written a stage adaptation of a Raymond Carver short story, which he is also directing and starring in. However, as opening night looms, Riggan must contend with both his brilliant-but-volatile co-star Mike Shiner (Edward Norton) and recovering addict daughter, Sam (Emma Stone). And there's also the fact that Birdman himself keeps turning up to mock and criticise him...

Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu has spent the past 15 years using movies to explore the human condition. While this might not sound particularly exciting, the likes of *Amores perros* (2000) and *Babel* (2006) have also demonstrated a desire on his part to experiment with the filmmaking process, and *Birdman* or (*The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*) – its full title – represents his most experimental flick to date. It also happens to be his most accessible and enjoyable.

Shot in a way that makes it seem like one continuous take, *Birdman* more than matches its technical triumphs with an acutely funny skewering of

show business – playing up the usual actor's angst to existential levels. In doing so it finds a rich vein of humour to mine, one that the excellent cast latch onto and run with.

Picture: *Birdman* may be more interested in psychology than action, but that doesn't mean that the film is in any way short of cinematic fireworks. Vibrant colours and meticulous detailing abounds throughout the Blu-ray's AVC 1.85:1 Full HD encode, bringing the stunning beauty of Emmanuel (*Gravity*) Lubezki's photography to life.

Audio: This DTS HD-MA 5.1 mix is far more involving than you may expect. The surrounds have plenty to work with as the camera follows Riggan around backstage, while more epic material such as Chapter 23's 'apocalypse' provides all of the booming bass and explosive dynamics you'd demand from a Summer blockbuster. A nice surprise.

Extras: A fascinating look behind-the-scenes (33 minutes), an interview with Iñárritu and Keaton (14 minutes) and a gallery of 41 on-set photos. And that's your lot.

HCC VERDICT

Birdman

→ Twentieth Century Fox

→ All-region BD → £25 approx

WE SAY: The extras features aren't as comprehensive as we'd hoped, but this is still a great Blu-ray for a superb film

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★★★★



The post-Oscar show was enlivened by a duel to decide who was taking home *Birdman*'s Best Picture award...

Percy's Progress

Network → Region B BD
£16 approx



This sequel to the 1971 British sex comedy *Percy* finds the randy bachelor fleeing the UK in order to escape incarceration,

only to return as a hero when a chemical weapon contaminates the world's water supplies and renders every other man impotent. While *Percy's Progress* is a very stupid film, it does at least stand up rather better than most of its contemporaries, due to a supporting cast that includes the likes of Denholm Elliott and Vincent Price. This BD features attractive 1.75:1 1080p visuals and cleanly-rendered LPCM mono audio. Extras are limited to two trailers and a gallery of posters and stills.



The Casual Vacancy

Warner Bros. → All-region BD
£25 approx



Based on J.K. Rowling's first post-*Harry Potter* novel, this three-part TV miniseries focuses on the seemingly idyllic

fictional town of Pagford, whose residents are at war with one another over the fate of a local community centre. Despite the first-rate cast that has been assembled, what unfolds is a curiously unsatisfying mix of satire and serious drama that ends up leaving a bitter taste in the mouth. Rather sweeter is the 1080p transfer, which gets the best of out the abundance of stunning photography. And the hi-def platter also finds space for a trio of *Making of...* featurettes.



Poldark: Complete Series One

ITV Studios → R2 DVD
£25 approx



Aidan Turner cuts a suitably Byronic figure as he rides his horse along Cornish cliff tops, broods over a lost love

and gets stuck into some shirtless scything in the BBC's eight-part adaptation of Winston Graham's series of historical novels. Not without humour, the show is very watchable – even if the final episode goes out of its way not to resolve any of the myriad plots, preferring to hold them back for the second series. This two disc set features solid anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers, a lively commentary for the first episode and three featurettes.



LEGO: Justice League vs. Bizarro League

Warner Bros. → All-region BD
£20 approx



When Superman's clumsy clone Bizarro makes his own Justice League using equally inept clones of Batman,

Wonder Woman *et al*, the real versions face their toughest (and silliest) challenge yet. Fun for LEGO and DC Comics fans of all ages, this CG animation look pretty super on Blu-ray and comes equipped with a dynamic DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. While the film itself only just makes it past the three-quarters-of-an-hour mark, the BD backs it up with an additional animated LEGO Batman story, a *Making of...* and a limited edition 'Batzarro' LEGO minifigure.



We're gonna party like it's 1999!

English-friendly German import will leave fans of Bigelow's sci-fi-noir feeling Fiennes

→ STRANGE DAYS: 20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It's the dying days of the 20th Century and as L.A. teeters on the brink of chaos, ex-cop-turned-hustler Lenny (Ralph Fiennes) is content to carry on making a living peddling black market 'clips': recordings of other people's memories that can be experienced with the aid of a digital headpiece. But when he comes into possession of a clip showing a rapper/political activist being executed by cops, Lenny finds himself caught up in a conspiracy of silence and pursued by people on both sides of the law.

Written by James Cameron and directed by Kathryn Bigelow, *Strange Days* is a wonderfully concocted piece of gripping sci-fi noir. While the setting may now be a distant memory, the film's major themes (not simply the miss-use of technology, but also concerns about race relations and police brutality) remain equally pertinent today.

Add to that some wonderful performances (for our money Fiennes, Angela Bassett and Juliette Lewis have never been better) and you can't help but feel that *Strange Days* is a modern sci-fi classic – albeit one that has never reached the level of acceptance it deserves.

Picture: The cover of this new German Blu-ray release describes it as an 'Ultrabit' release. What, if anything, this actually means is never explained, but the overall impression of the film's 2.40:1 Full HD encode is a favourable one.

While there are some signs of noise correction, it's not aggressive and certainly doesn't impact on the texture and detailing inherent in the image. Where it

Ralph Fiennes and Tom Sizemore make a toast to silly haircuts



really succeeds, though, is with the colour saturation, which is every bit as rich and vibrant as it should be. Meanwhile, black levels are stable throughout and there's no noticeable film damage.

Audio: As well as the default DTS-HD MA 5.1 German dub, this import-friendly release also includes a DTS-HD MA 5.1 presentation of the original English soundtrack. The latter mix is a very creative affair that makes particularly effective use of the entire soundstage during memory 'clips' to drive home the P.O.V. experience, where even the dialogue regularly moves around your speakers as the viewpoint shifts.

Extras: The Blu-ray offers up German and English trailers, while a bonus DVD houses a dissection of the opening scene, interviews, a *Making of...* featurette, two deleted scenes, a music video and the teaser – all with English audio, except for the *Making of...* (which has a German dub).



HCC VERDICT

Strange Days:
20th Anniversary Edition
→ Koch Media → Region B BD
(German Import) → £12 approx
WE SAY: Provocative sci-fi thriller finally gets the release it merits

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Predestination

Signature Entertainment
All-region BD → £17 approx



Based on the Robert A. Heinlein short story *All You Zombies*, this new film from *Daybreak* directors Michael and

Peter Spierig finds them re-teaming with actor Ethan Hawke for a mind-melting time travel flick. Smarter than the average genre outing, *Predestination* also boasts some excellent performances – not least a career-defining turn from Sarah Snook. However, while this UK release scores highly with its bold 1080p visuals and immersive DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics, it's also completely devoid of extras – so UK fans miss out on the 77-min *Making of...* that appeared on the US BD.



The Blob

Fabulous Films → Region B BD
£20 approx



Best known for giving the 27-year-old Steve McQueen his debut leading role (as the world's oldest teenager

outside of *Grease*), this 1958 B-movie serves up a hodgepodge of juvenile delinquency and sci-fi/horror with its tale of an amorphous alien snacking its way through smalltown America. This UK BD utilises the same 4K restoration as the 2013 Criterion US release, and the results are very impressive – especially when it comes to clarity and colour saturation. The DTS-HD MA 2.0 mix is perfectly functional, while extras are limited to five image galleries and a trailer.



Black Eagle

101 Films → Region B BD
£16 approx



Jean Claude Van Damme may loom large on the cover of this Blu-ray, but in reality he only plays a supporting

role as the Russian heavy in this Cold War thriller created as a vehicle for Japanese martial artist Sho Kosugi. Sadly, thrills and action are both in pretty short supply in this tedious Bond-wannabe, as is coherent dialogue due to English clearly not being the first language for many of the cast (including the lead). Even die-hard fans of duff '80s action flicks will find it hard to warm to *Black Eagle* on this BD thanks to the use of a dire HD master that even outdoes *Predator* in the DNR stakes.



The Samurai

Peccadillo Pictures → R2 DVD
£15 approx



Director Till Kleinert's freaky horror flick plays out like a warped adult fairy tale with its story of a young cop (Michel

Diercks) who encounters a sword-carrying, dress-wearing man (Pit Bukowski) in a remote house in the woods and is invited to join him on a crusade of destruction through a local village. This dreamlike film arrives on DVD with an attractive anamorphic 1.75:1 transfer that copes well with the film's mix of deep shadows and saturated primary colours, while the German DD5.1 mix conjures up an effective atmosphere of dread. Extras include a chat-track and interviews (all in English).



Four times the hi-def ninja action

Grab your balaclava and pyjamas and kick back with this '80s fight franchise

→ AMERICAN NINJA: THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION 1-4

The quintessential Cannon Films action franchise, the *American Ninja* films continue to hold a special place in the hearts of those who grew up in the '80s.

The 1985 original finds a US Army base in the Philippines having trouble with ninjas who keep hijacking truckloads of weapons. Thankfully, a recent arrival at the base, Private Joe Armstrong (Michael Dudikoff), just happens to be... a ninja! And *American!*

1987's *American Ninja 2: The Confrontation* keeps the fun going as Joe and soldier/martial arts expert Curtis Jackson (Steve James) are sent to the Caribbean where kidnapped US Marines are being brainwashed into joining an army of super ninjas.

Sadly, things go right off the rails with 1989's *American Ninja 3: Blood Hunt*, a real low-budget affair that introduces a brand new title character played by David Bradley. Sadly, while Bradley may be a better martial artist than Michael Dudikoff, he has all the charisma of a lump of wood. Add to that the pedestrian direction and you can hardly blame returning co-star Curtis James for uttering 'Ninjas? Not again.' at one point.

While James is absent from 1990's *American Ninja 4: The Annihilation*, it does at least bring Dudikoff back into the fold alongside Bradley, giving fans two American Ninjas for the price of one. But that's about all this cheapo sequel has going for it.

Picture: This four-disc Blu-ray boxset's quartet of 1.85:1-framed AVC encodes should put a smile on the faces of *American Ninja* fans, even if they don't really wow from a technical perspective.



HCC VERDICT

American Ninja: The Ultimate Collection 1-4

→ 88 Films

→ Region A/B BD → £25 approx

WE SAY: More hi-def ninja action than you could hope for at a bargain price

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



The ninjas finally got their *Britain's Got Talent* audition down pat

Sourced from MGM, the four HD masters are in pretty good shape, with little in the way of dirt or damage. Colours look authentic, detailing is above average and native grain is present throughout (even if it lacks refinement and look rather clumpy).

Audio: They may be chock-full of action, but these four films are very much products of their time where the audio mixes are concerned. The first film is content to offer up an LPCM presentation of the original mono soundtrack, while the three sequels do the same with their stereo mixes.

Extras: The *American Ninja* Blu-ray platter comes out fighting with a commentary from director Sam Firstenberg and stunt coordinator Steve Lambert, an exclusive 84-minute documentary about the series and the original '*American Warrior*' UK trailer.

The sole extra accompanying the sequels is a chat-track for *American Ninja 2...* by Firstenberg and stunt honcho B.J. Davis.



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High-class horror? Not quite...

Blu-ray restoration brings the best out of this icky '80s special effects showcase

→ SOCIETY: LIMITED EDITION

Re-Animator producer Brian Yuzna made his directorial debut in 1989 with this enjoyably gooey mix of satire and surreal body horror.

Between his wealthy family and beautiful girlfriend, Beverly Hills teen Bill (Billy Warlock) appears to have it all. So why has he spent his entire life feeling so cut-off from everyone around him? Why does he keep seeing weird things out of the corner of his eye? And what was really going on in the recording of his sister's coming out party that he listened to? The truth is far sicker and more perverse than Bill could ever have imagined.

From the uneven pacing to dodgy performances, it's clear from the off that *Society* is the work of someone finding their feet as a director. However, these issues fade away in the face of the film's sheer genre-mangling chutzpah as it hurtles towards its outrageous climax: a surreal orgy of latex and slime conjured up by special effects maestro Screaming Mad George. This final act is what lifts *Society* to another level and has ensured this unforgettable flick still enjoys a strong cult following.

Picture: This release is based on the 2K restoration that also served as the basis of the 2013 German Blu-ray. From rich blacks to a brilliantly gaudy colour palette and fine details, the 1.78:1-framed AVC encode is a real surprise, looking so far removed from the old UK DVD release that it's almost impossible to believe that it's the same movie.



Audio: While the disc's LPCM 2.0 stereo soundtrack doesn't offer much in the way of panning effects, it still proves proficient at rendering dialogue, music and all of the

squishy sound effects during the nightmarish last act.

Extras: The Blu-ray houses a director's commentary, plus interviews with Brian Yuzna, actors Billy Warlock, Devin DeVasquez, Ben Meyers and Tim Bartell, and special effects artists Screaming Mad George, David Grasso and Nick Benson. There's also a post-screening 2014 Q&A with the director, archive footage from the film's UK premiere, the trailer and a Screaming Mad George music video. This Limited Edition release is also bundled with a 24-page booklet and a reprint of the 2003 comic book sequel.

HCC VERDICT

Society: Limited Edition

→ Arrow Video → All-region BD & R0 DVD → £18 approx

WE SAY: An impressive hi-def rendering of this cult horror-comedy with a plethora of bonus goodies

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Mean Streets

Icon Home Entertainment
Region B BD → £13 approx



This long-awaited UK Blu-ray release of Martin Scorsese's energetic Italian-American crime drama is sure to please. Not only does the disc's AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode do a

magnificent job of capturing the film's gritty *cinéma-vérité* aesthetic, but the LPCM dual-mono soundtrack is surprisingly stable. The only slight disappointment is that, while Icon has licensed the trio of extras that appeared on the 2012 US platter (commentary, archival featurette and trailer), it's missed a trick by not licensing the additional documentaries and interviews that, to date, have only appeared on a 2011 French Blu-ray.



Paper Moon

Eureka! The Masters of Cinema Series
Region B BD & R2 DVD → £23 approx



Peter Bogdanovich's Depression-era road movie stars real-life father and daughter Ryan and Tatum O'Neal

as a con man and the young orphan girl he takes under his wing. Not only does this 1973 comedy-drama pack in a surfeit of charm, it also looks exquisite thanks to László Kovács' stunning black-and-white cinematography – something that is heightened by this Blu-ray's beautifully delineated and well-textured AVC 1.78:1 Full HD imagery. Worthwhile extras consist of a director's commentary, a trio of retrospective featurettes (total running time, 34 mins) and a 36-page booklet.



The Train

Arrow Academy → Region B BD
£16 approx



Burt Lancaster stars in this 1964 WWII thriller about an attempt to prevent a Nazi train full of stolen art from

leaving France. In the hands of director John Frankenheimer, *The Train* is a lesson in lean, powerful filmmaking with a narrative that keeps driving forward with all the momentum of the real thing. In addition to its impressively restored AVC 1.66:1 hi-def visuals and crisp lossless mono audio, this superb Blu-ray release also boasts a director's commentary, an archival French TV news report, a half-hour piece about Burt Lancaster's career during the '60s, and more.





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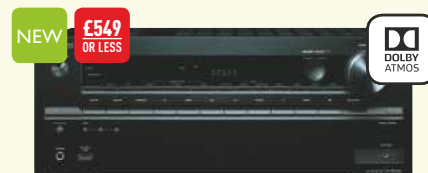


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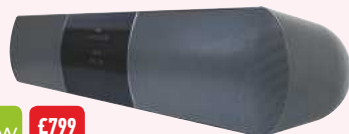
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NEED NEW SPEAKERS?
Our **Top 10** guide is here to help

HCC RATINGS KEY...	
Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

TOP 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed

**Samsung UE65JS9500** → £6,000

★★★★★

It's not cheap, but that's the only real downer about Samsung's startling new range-topper. The super-bright 4K panel is ready for incoming HDR/UHD BD content and the revamped Smart system is a winner, too. *HCC #246*

**Sony KD-65X9005B** → £3,600 ★★★★★

A groundbreaking set from Sony. The 'Wedge' cabinet design affords room for a best-in-class audio performance from the side-mounted speakers, while imagery is hard to fault. *HCC #236*

**Samsung UE55HU7500** → £2,300 ★★★★★

Don't want the curved form or higher price of the HU8500 range? Then step down to this flat model. No One Connect box, but otherwise it's equally impressive in PQ terms. *HCC #239*

**Panasonic TX-42AS600** → £430 ★★★★★

An example of the value that can be found in modern-day Full HD sets. This 42-inch offers the best elements of Panasonic's Smart system, dynamic images and a great price. *HCC #240*

**LG 65UB980V** → £3,000 ★★★★★

LG's 65in 4K display hides its size well courtesy of a super-cool bezel/stand design. Performance is generally excellent, barring a few backlight niggles, and the onboard speakers are fab. *HCC #241*

**LG 55EC930V** → £2,000 ★★★★★

OLED at an attainable price (well, almost), this 55-inch employs LG's WebOS platform and curved design. Full HD resolution, but the picture quality is stunning at times. *HCC #243*

**Linsar X24-DVD** → £300 ★★★★★

Many brands ignore screen sizes below 32in, so credit to Brit corp Linsar for releasing this 24in DVD-spinning Smart LED screen with punchy onboard speaker system. *HCC #244*

**Panasonic TX-55AX902** → £3,000 ★★★★★

Superior screen uniformity and crystal-clear detailing abound with Panasonic's pricey flagship LED screen, but motion processing isn't perfect. *HCC #244*

**Finlux 50F8075-T** → £600 ★★★★★

The best screen we've seen yet from the direct-retail brand, this 50-inch matches its affordability with a great user interface and solid, but not awe-inspiring, HD visuals. *HCC #234*

**Samsung UE40H6400** → £650 ★★★★★

This mid-market TV will probably sell like hotcakes. It ignores 4K in favour of Full HD, and combines a pleasing AV performance with plenty of useful Smart features. *HCC #236*

TECH INFO: TELEVISIONS



What? No plasma?: The TV market is now dominated by LED-lit LCD screens. Manufacture and sale of plasma display panels (PDPs), which previously came into play above 42in, has ceased, although you may still find some end-of-line stock. With LED comes newer technologies. 4K models with a native resolution of 3,840 x 2,160 should at least be on your audition list if you're thinking of a new display; curved models are also a consideration if you want to really impress the neighbours. OLED technology is championed by LG.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D era, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver full-res images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are now more common, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). The same halving occurs with a 4K screen. Some brands offer both Passive and Active models, depending on the panel used. Glasses-free 3D, heralded by Toshiba's early ZL2 TV, hasn't caught on, but still may make headway.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES

**The Book of Life 3D**

This colourful 'toon produced by fan-favourite Guillermo del Toro draws heavily on Mexican folklore – the result is a visual champion in both its 2D and 3D incarnations, and a shot in the arm for the animation genre.

★★★★★

**The Babadook**

The multichannel mix for this mature Australian horror flick mixes menacing bass with an eerie score that'll scare you silly, while the BD ups the fright-factor with its high-contrast 2.40:1 visuals.

★★★★★

**Paddington**

The pawed Peruvian gets a chance to shine on the bigscreen in this mischievous live action/CGI mashup. Junior AV-holics will dig the comedy antics, while even the grumpiest adults will savour the pin-sharp picture.

★★★★★

**Big Hero 6**

Energetic 'toon based on a Marvel comic, *Big Hero 6* mixes supervillain battles with a warm, touching narrative. Disney's hi-def disc offers a crisp 2.39:1 encode and effects-laden DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix.

★★★★★



**Interstellar**

Christopher Nolan's monster-budget cerebral sci-fi is a real Blu-ray showcase, with its IMAX-shot footage deserving of the biggest screen you can find, and Hans Zimmer's score sounding simply stunning.

★★★★★

Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1**  **Oppo BDP-103D → £600 ★★★★★**
 Oppo's first deck for two years was worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU featured a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs. AV performance was faultless, and the onscreen menus superb. This newer model, the BDP-103D, adds Darbee Visual Presence processing for you to play with. HCC #228
- 2**  **Pioneer BDP-LX88 → £1,300 ★★★★★**
 The Japanese corp returns to the disc-playing high-end with a universal deck that weighs more than your AVR and drips with user tweaks and processing features. Stonking performer. HCC #246
- 3**  **Oppo BDP-105D → £1,100 ★★★★★**
 This heavyweight deck builds upon the premium picture performance of the BDP-103D with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out. HCC #234
- 4**  **Arcam FMJ UDP411 → £1,200 ★★★★★**
 Pristine visuals – including upscaled SD – and a classy sonic performance grant this Arcam instant appeal. The design and build is commensurate with the premium price tag. HCC #244
- 5**  **Sony BDP-S7200 → £220 ★★★★★**
 A Sony deck without the curious angular design, the BDP-S7200 offers SACD support, hi-res audio streaming and 4K upscaling that's worth investigation. Not too pricey, either. HCC #239
- 6**  **Panasonic DMP-BDT700 → £500 ★★★★★**
 Claiming THX-certified 4K upscaling and HDMI 2.0 60p passthrough, this mid-range deck from Panasonic is a good partner for a modern display. Great audio option, too. HCC #237
- 7**  **Samsung BD-J7500 → £170 ★★★★★** NEW ENTRY
 This well-priced spinner offers twin HDMI outputs and multichannel phono audio for flexible system hookup, an appealing design, Smart features and solid AV chops. HCC #247
- 8**  **LG BP645 → £100 ★★★★★**
 An affordable, likeable offering from LG. The BP645 claims Spotify compatibility and Wi-Fi-enabled headphone listening among its bonus features. Slim but lightweight design. HCC #236
- 9**  **Pioneer BDP-160 → £130 ★★★★★**
 The successor to the BDP-150 adds integrated Wi-Fi, making media file playback simpler. The Smart cupboard is still practically empty, but SACD support softens the blow. HCC #227
- 10**  **Toshiba BDX5500 → £120 ★★★★★**
 The key attraction of Toshiba's £120 player (aside from its 3D, Miracast, 4K scaling and DLNA features) is its small form factor and vertical alignment. Good for space-tight setups. HCC #238

TECH INFO: BLU-RAY PLAYERS

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channelling audio to your receiver amp, the other piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation?: Sony's console still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joy pad is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most BD spinners. The newer, more expensive PS4 is a much better gaming machine, but won't play CDs!



DEMO DELIGHT

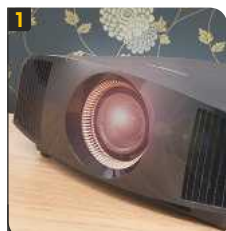
Edge of Tomorrow: This enjoyable, FX-packed Tom Cruise sci-fi scooped the Best Picture Quality gong in our Movie Awards. Shot on film for a realistic aesthetic, it transfers over to Blu-ray with a pristine 1080p image. The detailing is simply astonishing!

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TOP 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Sony VPL-VW300ES** → £5,800

★★★★★

Auditioning the newest, most affordable member of Sony's 4K range is a no-brainer. It loses a shade of brightness and the lens memory feature of its VPL-VW500ES stablemate, but retains the cinematic verve. Top of the class. *HCC #243*

**Epson EH-LS10000** → £6,000 ★★★★★

Debating a laser light source (30,000 hours) and Epson's 4K enhancement processing, this large chassis model is a cinematic triumph. Essential audition for a dedicated room. *HCC #247*

**JVC DLA-X500R** → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more adept third generation of the brand's proprietary e-shift technology, the X500R continues JVC's winning ways – contrast rich, sharp and full of tweaks. *HCC #232*

**Epson EH-TW7200** → £1,900 ★★★★★

Priced to appeal to those unable to dabble in the £3,000 market, Epson's mid-ranger is a great purchase. No frame interpolation on offer, but colours, contrast and brightness impress. *HCC #232*

**JVC DLA-X700R** → £7,300 ★★★★★

A hefty chunk more expensive than the X500R, but with an improved contrast performance (and more flexible installation options) that will reward those who splash the cash. *HCC #238*

**Optoma HD50** → £1,000 ★★★★★

With a retweaked user interface that improves upon previous Optoma light-cannons, the 12V-trigger-toting HD50 is a brilliant budget buy. *HCC #239*

**BenQ W1070+** → £650 ★★★★★

An accomplished low-budget DLP model, the W1070+ offers ISF-certified calibration and a 12V trigger in conjunction with a sharp, bright, detailed performance. Bit of a bargain! *HCC #240*

**Philips Screeneo HDPI590** → £1,500 ★★★★★

Neatly designed, the Screeneo offers ultra-short throw projection thrills, albeit at 720p (and the DVB tuner is SD). Good speakers and networking skills complete a nice package. *HCC #233*

**Sony VPL-HW55ES** → £2,800 ★★★★★

Not one of Sony's 4K models, but this keenly priced Full HD projector delivers where it counts, with solid calibration options, simple setup and brilliant 2D visuals. No 12V trigger. *HCC #230*

**ViewSonic PLED-W800** → £500 ★★★★★

Portable (but not battery-powered) LED-lit PJ with 1,280 x 800 res. BDs look decent on a large screen, with nice colour punch, and it incorporates a useful media player. *HCC #247*

TECH INFO: PROJECTORS



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

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Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx
and may have changed**Q Acoustics 3000 5.1** → £700

A superior compact package with driver improvements over the previous 2000i series. The two-way cabinets and dual-driver sub combine to offer seriously impressive audio for the money. Design and build rock, too. HCC #247

**B&W 683 Theatre 5.1** → £2,750 ★★★★★

The first step on the floorstanding ladder in B&W's speaker stable, the 600 Series incorporates new tweeter and bass driver designs and offers absurd value for money. HCC #234

**KEF R Series 7.1** → £6,500 ★★★★★

A 7.1 array mixing dipolar and direct surrounds, this authoritative package takes its cues from KEF's Blade concept speaker and offers faultless, largescale home cinema sonics. HCC #217

**Kreisel Sound Quattro 7.2** → £8,500 ★★★★★

Mixing two mammoth woofers with some surprisingly manageable multi-tweeter speakers (including TriFX surrounds) this US package is supremely assured. HCC #232

**Artcoustic Spitfire SL 7.2** → £17,000 ★★★★★

Slimmed-down cabinets now even easier to install on-wall or behind a screen, with a multi-driver design ensuring they're easy to drive to high SPLs. Ideal for dedicated rooms. HCC #233

**Tannoy Precision Series 5.1** → £4,450 ★★★★★

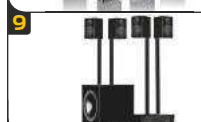
These speakers' classic look belies the brand's hi-fi heritage, but this multichannel setup works wonders with movies, too – a rich, large and dynamic sound is on offer. HCC #226

**Pioneer S Series 5.0.4** → £2,150 ★★★★★

With Atmos-upfiring drivers incorporated into the cabinets (both the front floorstanders and surround standmounts) this is a neat way of upgrading your system. Bassy, fulsome sound. HCC #247

**Definitive Technology ProCinema 600** → £500 ★★★★★

A compact system which achieves impressive scale courtesy of additional passive radiators mounted in the satellite cabinets. Slick styling and a cohesive, fun sound. HCC #244

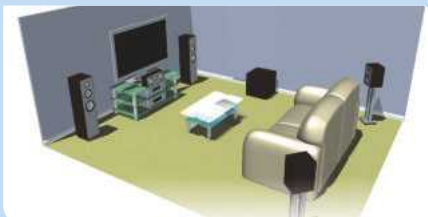
**Monitor Audio Radius R90HTI** → £1,500 ★★★★★

The Radius speakers have been revamped with new drivers and rear ports, and this 5.1 set provides a clear, detailed sound with plenty of heft. Floorstanders are an option, too. HCC #230

**Acoustic Energy 1-Series 5.1** → £1,400 ★★★★★

The unadventurous design won't appeal to some, but elsewhere this sensibly-priced floorstanding package ticks a lot of boxes. An unflustered sound that likes to go loud. HCC #246

TECH INFO: SPEAKERS



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

DEMO DELIGHT

Godzilla: Hollywood tackles the iconic aquatic beastie once again, and the Blu-ray comes armed with a DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix that's dynamic, powerful, aggressive, detailed and expansive from start to finish. Check out Chapter 8's M.U.T.O. circling sequence for a masterclass in precision and control.

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TOP 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS

All prices are approx and may have changed

**Onkyo TX-NR3030** → £2,500

★★★★★

The current king of Atmos AVR, this 11-channel design enables four height speakers to be added to an existing 7.1 array with ease. Lithe on its feet and with exemplary steering, this is multichannel audio at its best. *HCC #245*

**Denon AVR-X5200W** → £1,700 ★★★★★

Offering Atmos – and Auro-3D via a paid upgrade – the Denon X5200W offers nine amp channels and 11.2 processing. Energetic sound and flexible setup. *HCC #243*

**Onkyo TX-NR838** → £1,000 ★★★★★

A nicely-specced mid-range AVR, offering 5.1.2 Atmos playback (as well as regular 7.1) in addition to HDCP 2.2 support, which will please future-gazers. Crisp-sounding sonics. *HCC #240*

**Arcam AVR750** → £4,000 ★★★★★

If all you want from an AV receiver is vast power and effortless performance, this high-end 7.1-channel beast is tailored to you. Little bonus features beyond audio networking. *HCC #225*

**Marantz NR-1605** → £600 ★★★★★

A brilliant option for those cowed by full-form AVRs, the NR-1605 sees Marantz retool its slender line to include integrated Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. Agile, sprightly and easy to use. *HCC #239*

**Datasat LS10** → £10,000 ★★★★★

The 'entry-level' AV slab in Datasat's home audio range, this processor (upgradable to Auro-3D for a fee) is all about precision. Feature-lite, but it sounds phenomenal. *HCC #244*

**Yamaha RX-A3040** → £2,000 ★★★★★

This superb Atmos-ready flagship AVR features a fluid, dynamic sonic signature, slick operation and reassuringly robust design and build. Good in stereo mode, too. *HCC #239*

**Primare SPA23** → £3,500 ★★★★★

A stripped-down five-channel amp that majors on sublime, and power-packed, multichannel delivery. Limited functionality, but that's not what this luxury slab is all about. *HCC #237*

**Pioneer VSX-924** → £500 ★★★★★

Pioneer's newest £500 model brings Bluetooth and Wi-Fi, an even better control app, HDMI 2.0 specification and under-the-hood tweaks. A great-value, good performer. *HCC #236*

**Yamaha RX-V577** → £500 ★★★★★

Loaded with DSP modes (some fun, some not) and Wi-Fi-enabled for audio streaming, this clean-sounding Yamaha is a great low-budget option. Bluetooth via optional dongle. *HCC #237*

TECH INFO: AV RECEIVERS



Tackling new heights: A recent innovation in AVR circles is the introduction of Dolby Atmos, the object-based sound format that has taken off in commercial cinemas and is supported in the home by the likes of Onkyo, Pioneer, Denon, Marantz and Yamaha. This requires new height speakers in addition to a regular 'flat' 5.1 or 7.1 speaker configuration. The heights can either be physically mounted in/on your ceiling, or provided via up-firing reflective models. Setup can be complex, but the results are certainly impressive. Atmos-encoded Blu-rays are a bit thin on the ground, but you can use Dolby Surround post-processing with regular 5.1/7.1 soundtracks to get the most from your new AVR/speakers. Rivals to Atmos are Auro-3D, which uses height speakers in a different configuration, and the forthcoming DTS:X. Most AVR brands have already pledged support for the latter.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V675 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.

TOP 5 BONUS FEATURES

**Scream Queens: Horror Heroines Exposed**

Found on 88 Films' recent hi-def outing for classic 1980s slasher *Graduation Day*, this feature-length doc lets some of the genre's leading ladies reminisce about the horror industry.

★★★★★

**The Science of Interstellar**

From black holes to the search for planets that can support life, this engrossing 50-minute doc (narrated by Matthew McConaughey) explores the scientific rationale that lies at the heart of the recent sci-fi epic.

★★★★★

**The Furious Gods: The Making of Prometheus**

Ridley Scott's films always come loaded with extra features (remember *Blade Runner?*) and *Prometheus* is no exception. This is easily one of the best *Making of...* docs ever made.

★★★★★

**Episode Reconstructions**

Only 20 of the 49 episodes of the BBC sci-fi series *Out of the Unknown* still exist in the archives. Thankfully, the BFI's DVD boxset uses surviving audio and stills to reconstruct several of these missing shows.

★★★★★

**Evolution with Extinction**

Clocking in at around two hours, this eight-part supplement looks at every aspect of the creation of Michael Bay's *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, from developing the story right up to the film's Hong Kong premiere.

★★★★★

Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed

- 1  **SVS SB-2000** → £650 ★★★★★
This follow up to the SB-1000, which incorporates a new 12in driver and revamped Sledge DSP amplifier, offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbibes your Blu-rays with potent LFE, the SB-2000 sounds quick and taut, and is a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. HCC #233
- 2  **REL 212SE** → £2,750 ★★★★★
Lush design joins engineering nous in this premium sub with two active 12in drivers supported by a pair of passive radiators. Loud, deep and impactful, your BDs are in safe hands. HCC #246
- 3  **JL Audio Fathom F212** → £5,900 ★★★★★
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3,000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these! HCC #214
- 4  **REL S-5** → £1,600 ★★★★★
A step up from REL's affordable T series, this 12in model is large and weighty, with a performance level to match. Fast and tight but capable of dropping very low indeed. HCC #234
- 5  **Bowers & Wilkins DB1** → £3,250 ★★★★★
Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. HCC #197
- 6  **Bowers & Wilkins PVID** → £1,200 ★★★★★
One of the coolest-looking subs on the planet, B&W's PVID uses DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class. HCC #212
- 7  **BK Electronics P12-300SB-DF** → £475 ★★★★★
Bass heads can get outrageous value for money in the shape of BK's overperforming 12in sub. A front-firing model is also offered, and other finishes knock the ticket down to sub-£400. HCC #247
- 8  **JL Audio E-Sub e112** → £2,050 ★★★★★
This 12in, 1,500W model from JL Audio's 'entry-level' line seems pricey, but its performance, design and tuning options make the investment oh-so worthwhile. HCC #240
- 9  **REL Habitat 1** → £1,300 ★★★★★
With its LongBow wireless system and wall-mountable design, REL's newest woofer is aimed at those seeking discreet bass. Twin 6.5in drivers work fast and with considerable grip. HCC #231
- 10  **SVS PB-2000** → £750 ★★★★★
The ported sibling to the SB-2000, this woofer uses the same driver and amp arrangement, but in a far larger cabinet. Bass goes deeper, but not at the expense of finesse. HCC #243

TECH INFO



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

DEMO DELIGHT

Fury: The DTS-HD 5.1 track of Brad Pitt's tank drama is truly a thing to savour, with the audio engineers striving hard to deliver a packed, detailed soundfield that puts you right in the action. And, with its frequent artillery explosions, it's no surprise to find the LFE channel getting a thorough workout. Shells hit deliciously hard with taut bass throbs, while the eponymous tank's rumbles will scare your neighbours.

Top 5 CONSOLE GAMES



Halo: The Master Chief Collection
Xbox One releases don't come much more essential than this collection of remastered HD versions of the first four *Halo* games, plus access to the beta version of the upcoming *Halo 5*. ★★★★★



Far Cry 4
Ubisoft cements its position as the undisputed king of the 'sandbox-shooter' as it serves up a beautifully-rendered and sonically immersive Nepalese nation state for you to blast your way around. Huge fun. ★★★★★



Alien Isolation
This fantastic 'survival-horror' captures the unsettling atmosphere of Ridley Scott's feature film with aplomb. The lighting effects and audio cues are suitably spooky, and the gameplay is nerve-shredding. ★★★★★



The Order 1886
Sony's puzzle-infused actioner may prove a little short in run-time for seasoned gamers, but it's graphically sensational – we love the use of the 'Scope ratio' – and the multichannel audio is a treat. ★★★★★



Dragon Age: Inquisition
Finished with *Skryim*? Then pick up this third instalment in the *Dragon Age* fantasy RPG series. A great-looking title, with plenty of side-quests littered around its vast open world to keep you adventuring for hours. ★★★★★

TOP 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

- 1 Now TV box → £10 ★★★★★**
 An unqualified bargain, this Wi-Fi VOD streamer from Sky (and built upon Roku hardware) brings BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and the Roku Channel Store to any HDMI-toting telly, plus subscription access to Sky Movies and Sky Sports. The quality of the adaptive bitrate streaming is impressive, and the £10 tag gets you P&P and an HDMI cable. *HCC #226*
- 2 Devolo dLAN 650 Triple+ starter pack → £120 ★★★★★**
 This package makes Powerline networking fast (claimed at up to 600Mbps) and easy. The three-port Ethernet extender is sleekly designed, and provides a regular plug socket, too. *HCC #239*
- 3 Dune HD Base 3D → £250 ★★★★★**
 A media player for the AV enthusiast. Full-width and fully-featured, it provides support for 3D BD rips and much more, with a slick user interface and plenty of connectivity. *HCC #235*
- 4 Amazon Fire TV → £70 ★★★★★**
 A media player for the Smart generation, this affordable puck features class-leading voice recognition that makes content browsing fun – indispensable for Amazon Prime lovers. *HCC #243*
- 5 HDAnywhere mHub → £1,000 ★★★★★**
 An impressively flexible multiroom solution that allows HD video and audio to be sent via Cat cable to four displays from multiple sources. Includes HDMI mirroring, too. Handy. *HCC #240*
- 6 Philips Hue → £180 ★★★★★**
 These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast. *HCC #220*
- 7 Monitor Audio Airstream A100 → £400 ★★★★★**
 Partner your TV with the speakers of your choice with this networked, AirPlay-streaming two-channel amp. Great, svelte design – bit awkward to control, though. *HCC #238*
- 8 Microsoft Xbox One → £430 ★★★★★**
 Not as graphically potent as the PS4 (below) but the new Xbox lives up to its billing as a home entertainment hub – voice control and multi-tasking tricks prove very useful. *HCC #230*
- 9 Sony PlayStation 4 → £350 ★★★★★**
 The PS4 offers a killer gaming experience, with the under-the-hood power resulting in great-looking games. 3D Blu-ray playback has now been added via firmware. *HCC #229*
- 10 Philips SW750M → £130 ★★★★★**
 A multiroom-ready speaker that works with the Spotify Connect service, this curved cabinet offers a decent, punchy sound for the price tag. No Bluetooth, DLNA or external hookup. *HCC #246*

TECH INFO: MEDIA PLAYERS



What about my TV?: Most flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with



multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.

TOP 5 BLU-RAY/DVD BOX SETS

**Wolf Hall**

The BBC's recent six-part historical drama features an A-list cast and lavish production values, while this BD boxset carries crisp 1080i visuals and an evocative DTS-HD MA stereo soundtrack.

★★★★★

**Game of Thrones: The Complete Fourth Season**

Now in its fourth run, HBO's award-winning fantasy series continues to dazzle, as do the Blu-ray releases – the AV presentation here is superb, backed up by plenty of extras.

★★★★★

**The Long Good Friday + Mona Lisa**

Two of Bob Hoskins' most iconic roles presented in an extras-packed boxset and given thoroughly impressive HD transfers – both look wonderfully filmic.

★★★★★

**The Avengers: The Complete Series Four**

A combination of beautifully restored episodes and a vast array of supplementary features ensure that this rather pricey boxset is a must-own for fans of the cult '60s British TV series.

★★★★★


**Twin Peaks: The Entire Mystery**


Both seasons of the US cult TV series and the prequel flick ...Fire Walk With Me are given a fan-pleasing 10-disc BD release, sporting 7.1 DTS-HD audio and a treasure trove of bonus bits.


★★★★★


Top 10 SOUNDBARS & SOUNDBASES


All prices are approx & may have changed


- 


Canton DM75 → £450 ★★★★★
Bigger and bolder than the already excellent DM50 (which retails for £100 less), Canton's sturdily-built soundbase speaker lacks HDMI inputs but makes up for it with Bluetooth streaming and a brilliant 2.1-channel performance packing weight, scale and detail. Simplistic, understated design. *HCC #243*
- 


Monitor Audio ASB-2 → £1,000 ★★★★★
This premium proposition marries Monitor Audio's C-CAM drivers with AirPlay and DLNA music streaming. Performance is exemplary – powerful and polished in equal measure. *HCC #229*
- 


Yamaha YSP-2500 → £800 ★★★★★
An HDMI-switching 'sound projector' using Yamaha's Beam tech to craft impressive surround sonics from its drivers. Efficient sub, plenty of detailing and fun/useful app control. *HCC #243*
- 


Cambridge Audio TV5 → £300 ★★★★★
Twin 6.5in bass drivers lend the TV5's sound some decent low-end heft, but not to the detriment of the rest of the soundstage. An enjoyable, balanced listen. Easy to use. *HCC #245*
- 

Q Acoustics Media 4 → £400 ★★★★★
A no-nonsense offering from the speaker specialist, which ignores HDMI inputs and daft DSP modes in favour of creating a nuanced, solid 2.1 soundscape. *HCC #238*
- 

Philips HTL9100 → £600 ★★★★★
A soundbar/sub that incorporates two removable side speakers to allow it to become a wireless 5.1 system, this Philips is a neat proposition, and easy to install. *HCC #238*
- 

Pioneer SBX-N500 → £250 ★★★★★
£250 gets you this single-enclosure audio offering with welcome DLNA functionality, USB input, HDMI ARC output (but no input) and Bluetooth. Weighty, vibrant sound. *HCC #238*
- 

Yamaha SRT-1000 → £450 ★★★★★
A reasonably sleek soundbase with a thumping bass output, crisp highs, app control and Beam driver tech that strives hard to deliver a 5.1 experience. *HCC #243*
- 

Humax STE-1000BSW → £180 ★★★★★
A striking design and bargain price tag will get Humax's debut 'bar plenty of admirers. Performance is decent for the money, albeit lacking low-frequency finesse. *HCC #238*
- 

Samsung HW-J8500 → £900 ★★★★★
Samsung's second-gen curved soundbar ups the driver count and the price tag. Performance is decent, but you can find more finesse and bass integration elsewhere. *HCC #246*

TECH INFO: TV PLATFORMS



TV addicts – go free, or pay-to-view?:

The landscape of the UK television industry has changed hugely in the last decade. The analogue switch-off has created a competitive market in free-to-air platforms, while Sky and Virgin Media are squaring up to the likes of EE TV, Amazon Prime and Netflix. Deciding which service is right for you can be complex, and you may find your needs are best catered for by a combination.

Sky+HD: The long-running satcaster offers a plethora of HD channels, with content including recent movie releases, live sports and sought-after US shows. Hardware options include the 2TB dual-tuner PVR.

Virgin Media TiVo: The cable giant offers a three-tuner PVR (1TB) with intelligent TiVo recording tricks, catch-up apps (including Netflix and Spotify), and over 240 channels (depending on package). Premium Sky content can be added on a monthly basis.

Freeview: The common option when it comes to TVs and set-top boxes. Freeview offers 13 HD channels (depending on regional roll-out) plus SD and radio. No contract fee.

Freesat: Satellite service offering a similar – but not identical – channel lineup to Freeview, delivered to your HD flatscreen via a dish but without a subs cost. As with Freeview, budget-priced STBs are available.

YouView: This relatively new kid on the block integrates the UK's main catchup portals directly into a backwards EPG. Again, channels are broadly similar to Freeview and there's no contract. Humax (PVRs) and Sony (TVs) are leading the hardware charge.

Top 5 BACK-CATALOGUE BLU-RAYS



The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Miss Osbourne
Loopy 'art-sploitation' masterpiece from Walerian Borowczyk given a welcome BD release by Arrow Video that captures its deliberately diffuse, dreamlike visuals. ★★★★★



Blood and Black Lace
Mario Bava's genre-defining 1964 slasher makes its hi-def debut with a dazzling new 2K restoration that really gets the best out of the film's bold colour palette, alongside an exhaustive array of supplementary features. ★★★★★



Wooden Crosses
This French war movie released in 1932 looks in great shape on this Masters of Cinema Blu-ray thanks to a new 4K restoration. There's plenty of discussion about the disc's production among the ample extras, too. ★★★★★

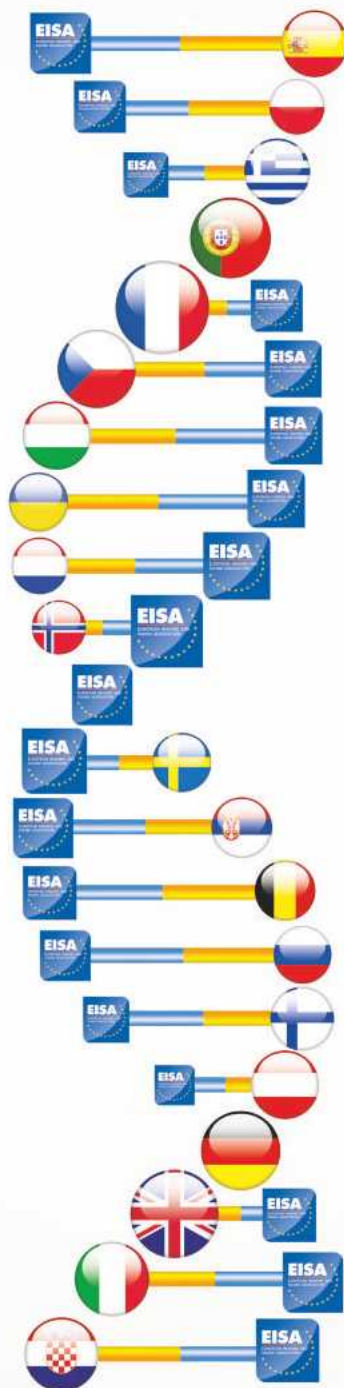


The Wizard of Oz 3D
Delivering the best-looking version of the film to date (derived from a new 8K scan), this superb pack also squeezes in all the original extras and a 3D conversion that adds layers of fun to Dorothy's adventure. ★★★★★



The Day The Earth Caught Fire
The highlight of the BFI's 'Sci-Fi: Days of Wonder' festivities, this stunning Blu-ray restoration should introduce this underrated British disaster flick to the wider audience it deserves. ★★★★★

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TOP 5 PVRs

**Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription**

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★

**Sky+HD, £subscription**

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★

**Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250**

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★

**Humax DTR-T2000, £180**

This second-gen 500GB YouView PVR benefits from some under-the-hood tweaks that make the time-shifting experience slicker than ever. Useful app control, but no home media playback offered.

★★★★★

**EE TV Smart Box £subscription**

This quad-tuner 1TB PVR, from the mobile/broadband corp, offers innovative Replay 24-hour channel recording and great Smart device streaming. Needs more catch-up though

★★★★★

TOP 5 HEADPHONES

**Sony MDR-HW700DS, £800**

Comfy cans supplied with an HDMI surround processor, enabling multichannel audio to be fed to a virtual 9.1-channel soundstage. The effect is superb – great for late-night listening

★★★★★

**Oppo PM-1, £1,100**

Audiophile-grade, using planar magnetic driver designs, and with a lush design and build. The sound quality of the PM-1s is superb, so while these are undoubtedly costly, buyers won't be disappointed

★★★★★

**Lindy Cromo NCX-100, £100**

A cost-effective domestic option and great for travelling, these noise-cancelling 'phones (which can also be used as a normal passive design) feature a pleasant, balanced sound

★★★★★

**PSB M4U1, £220**

Aimed at both home and on-the-move use (and supplied with a carry case and two cable options), the M4U1s offer solid bass response and impactful highs. Build quality is good, as is comfort

★★★★★

**AKG K550, £200**

The styling of these closed-back cans is reassuringly 'classic' and the sound signature is surprisingly open and spacious. Use them for movie watching and you'll enjoy a good sense of scale and weight

★★★★★

TOP 5 SYSTEMS

**Panasonic SC-BTT505, £600**

Two-way driver arrangements in these grown-up looking speakers (plus a dizzying range of features) make this a great purchase. Big, dynamic sound, with strong dialogue

★★★★★

**Samsung HT-H7750WM, £850**

The top-flight system from Samsung in 2014 uses tallboy speakers all around. Plenty of features here, and a fulsome 5.1 performance, but the build quality is a bit disappointing

★★★★★

**Harman/Kardon BDS470, £650**

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features, but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★★

**LG BH8220B, £650**

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★★

**Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350**

A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA

Choice

→ IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Five years of 3D Has the format failed – and if so, why?

Cinerama Looking back at wiiiiide movies

Home cinema in space! How the ISS built its zero-gravity projection screen...

→ ON TEST

Pioneer VSX-930 AV receiver **LG 65UF850 4K TV**

Arcam Solo Bar/Sub **SVS Prime 5.1 speakers**

Eclipse Time Domain subwoofer **Panasonic**

HTB855 soundbar **Bluetooth speaker roundup**

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Diamond 157 Speakers <i>Wharfedale</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Traditional speaker ✓ Wider soundstage ✓ Three finishes ✓ Bass reflex port system <p>From £349</p> <p>50% OFF</p>	Bronze BX2 Walnut 5.1 Speaker Package <i>MONITOR AUDIO</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 4 x BX2 Bookshelf ✓ 1 x BX Centre ✓ 1 x BXW10 Subwoofer ✓ C-cam drivers <p>Was: £1099.00 £839</p> <p>£260 OFF</p>	Vector V-W8 White Subwoofer <i>MONITOR AUDIO</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 8" long throw woofer ✓ Forward firing driver ✓ 100Watt amplifier ✓ Auto-on-off facility <p>Was: £259.95 £130</p> <p>50% OFF</p>	Hollywood Digital Optical Cable 0.5m <i>FISUAL</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Gold plated tips ✓ Standard toslink ✓ Digital audio ✓ Polished optical core <p>Was: £24.99 £10.99</p> <p>56% OFF</p>
Diamond 155 5.1 Speaker Package <i>Wharfedale</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 2 x Diamond 155 ✓ 101C Centre ✓ WH-S10 Subwoofer ✓ 2 x DFS on-wall <p>Was: £1200.00 £699</p> <p>42% OFF</p>	XHP180 8-Outlet Mains Extension Strip <i>IXOS</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Surge protection ✓ 1.5m cable ✓ Lifetime warranty ✓ AC Noise Filtering <p>Was: £29.99 £19.99</p> <p>33% OFF</p>	Element EMT850 TV Cabinet <i>alphason</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ With Black Plinth ✓ Adjustable shelves ✓ Good ventilation ✓ Media storage <p>Was: £274.99 £150</p> <p>45% OFF</p>	TS2.10 Black Vinyl Subwoofer <i>TANNOY</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Double driver config ✓ 300 Watt amplifier ✓ 25mm cabinet ✓ Side firing <p>Was: £449.00 £299</p> <p>33% OFF</p>
Diamond 101C Center Speaker <i>Wharfedale</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Traditional ✓ Compact ✓ Three finishes ✓ Sturdy cabinet <p>Was: £229.95 £99</p> <p>57% OFF</p>	XHK405 Twisted Pair Subwoofer Kit 9m <i>IXOS</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Twisted pair tech ✓ High grade PC-OFC ✓ Ultra slim design ✓ Gamma Geometry <p>Was: £34.99 £12.99</p> <p>63% OFF</p>	Ultraflex 16/4 Install Speaker Cable 150m <i>IXOS</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ High strand count ✓ CL3 rated ✓ 6.5mm Diameter ✓ 4 Core 16 AWG <p>Was: £195.00 £120</p> <p>38% OFF</p>	Performance HDMI To Mini HDMI 1m <i>QED</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Double screened cable ✓ Custom designed plugs ✓ 30 AWG conductors ✓ Ideal For HD cameras <p>Was: £28.99 £4.99</p> <p>83% OFF</p>

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★★★★★

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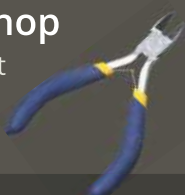
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AV AVENGER

Steve May suggests that, when it comes to home cinema, thinking small can be the new thinking big – although having a 60in Kuro lying around always helps

IF YOU'RE PREPARED to pony up the best part of £2million and have a vacant space measuring at least 7m x 10m, you can have your very own IMAX Private Theatre. The purveyor of the biggest cinema screens around has licensed a home cinema solution comprising dual DLP projectors, pro-grade 7.1 speaker array, gargantuan electronics and (probably) a top-of-the-range popcorn machine.

This is fine and dandy. I look forward to reading what Mark Zuckerberg thinks of his Private Theatre on Facebook. But I have my own IMAX home cinema, and it's cost me a good deal less. You can have one too. All that's needed is copious self delusion.

Pedants might argue that my IMAX theatre is nothing of the sort, owing to the fact that it fulfils none of the universally recognised IMAX criteria. But they'll be missing the point. **Think back to the last movie you caught in IMAX. Your recollection will be one of sensory overload** – a field of vision engulfed by moving images, uncomfortably loud audio and (probably) a slight crick in the back of your neck. All these things are easy to achieve at home.

Thinking inside the box

The best place for any wannabe-IMAX is most likely going to be the smallest room in the house, apart from the downstairs toilet of course. Mine is in a 2.8m x 2.1m box room. Before I reclaimed it, the space was a dumping ground, an elephant's graveyard notable only for its lack of elephants. A visit to the tip and a lick of white painted sorted all that. A dimmable light was my only extravagance.

The all-important screen chosen for my televisual TARDIS was a disenfranchised plasma, more specifically a last-generation (9th) 60in Pioneer Kuro. This beast may be past its sell-by date, but its

image quality remains divine and only a cataclysmic panel failure could convince me to part with it.

Admittedly, Thor's hammer might have been easier to heft upstairs, but once transported to its final resting place the fit was perfect (the box room door only just clears the TV stand as it opens inward). A comfy but inexpensive two-seater sofa sits square; the viewing distance from bum to 60in glass is an intimate 1.5m. Some will moan this is way too close for comfort. I say don't knock it until you've tried it. Plasma actually lends itself well to close-quarter viewing. A self-emissive display, there's no torch-like backlight which could be problematic – and the Kuro's unquestionably cinematic 1080p screen stands very close scrutiny indeed.

Such an IMAX-in-a-box is incredibly accommodating when it comes to audio. I use a simple 2.1 package, although decent headphones would be an agreeable alternative. If you want to go full Zuckerberg, you could even get away with a low-cost Dolby Atmos HTIB package.

The room doesn't have an aerial or dish feed, but doesn't need them. Sources include consoles, Blu-ray and an Amazon Fire TV box. All could work fine over Wi-Fi but are hardwired via Powerline.


The really great thing is everyone in the house now loves the room. It's a brilliant place to game, and a cozy bolt-hole for Netflix and Amazon Prime binge watching. Dim the lights and you get a face-full of action. The viewing experience is wonderfully immersive. And the heat thrown out by the Kuro screen is enough to bring a rosy red glow of satisfaction to anyone's cheeks.

It may be more Lie-Max than IMAX, but it's MyMAX. In your face Zuck! ■

Have you got a home cinema bolt-hole in your house? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Steve May won't be happy until every single room in his house is set up for HD movie-watching. And then he'll think about a TV for the garden shed





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